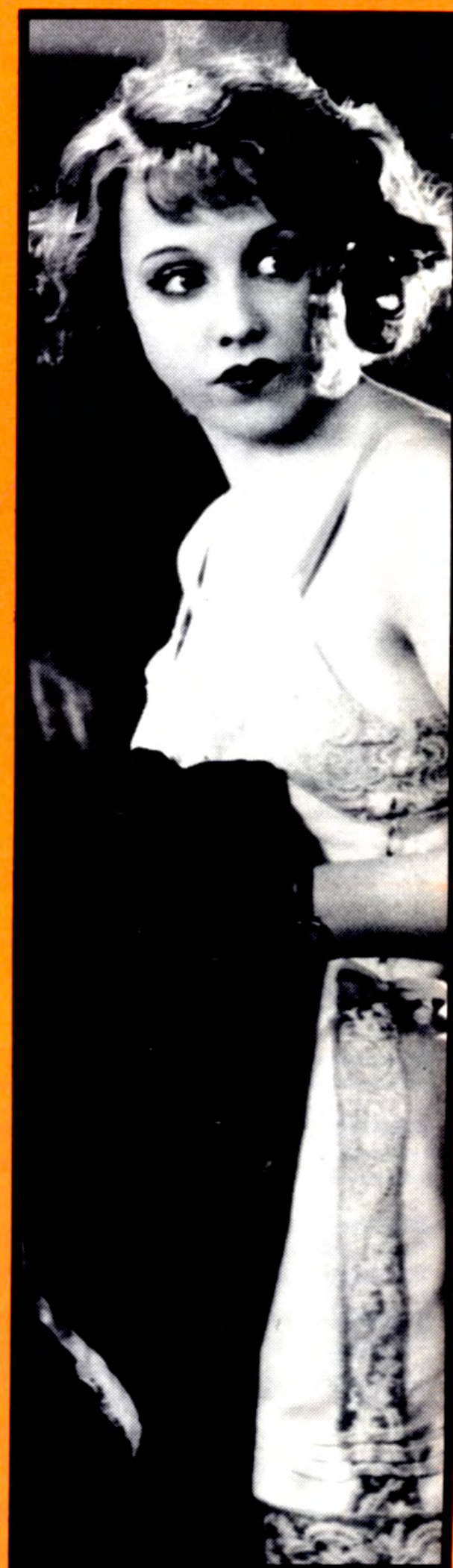
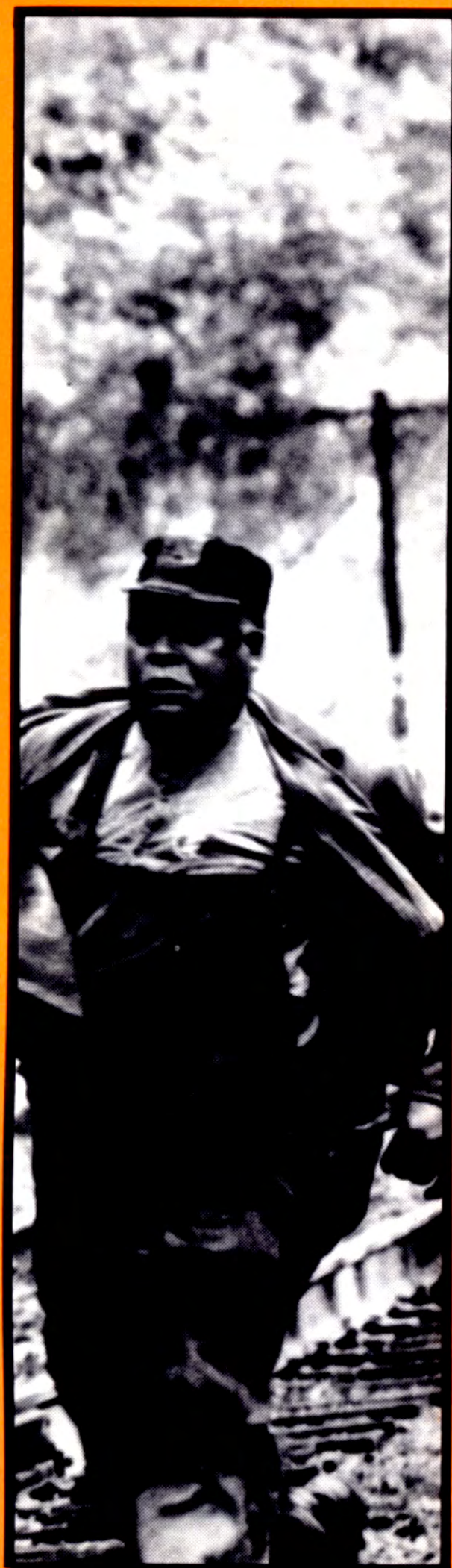


# cineACTION!

A MAGAZINE OF RADICAL FILM CRITICISM & THEORY

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No. 15  
Winter '88-'89



# interpretation

# CineAction!

## No. 15

### December 1988

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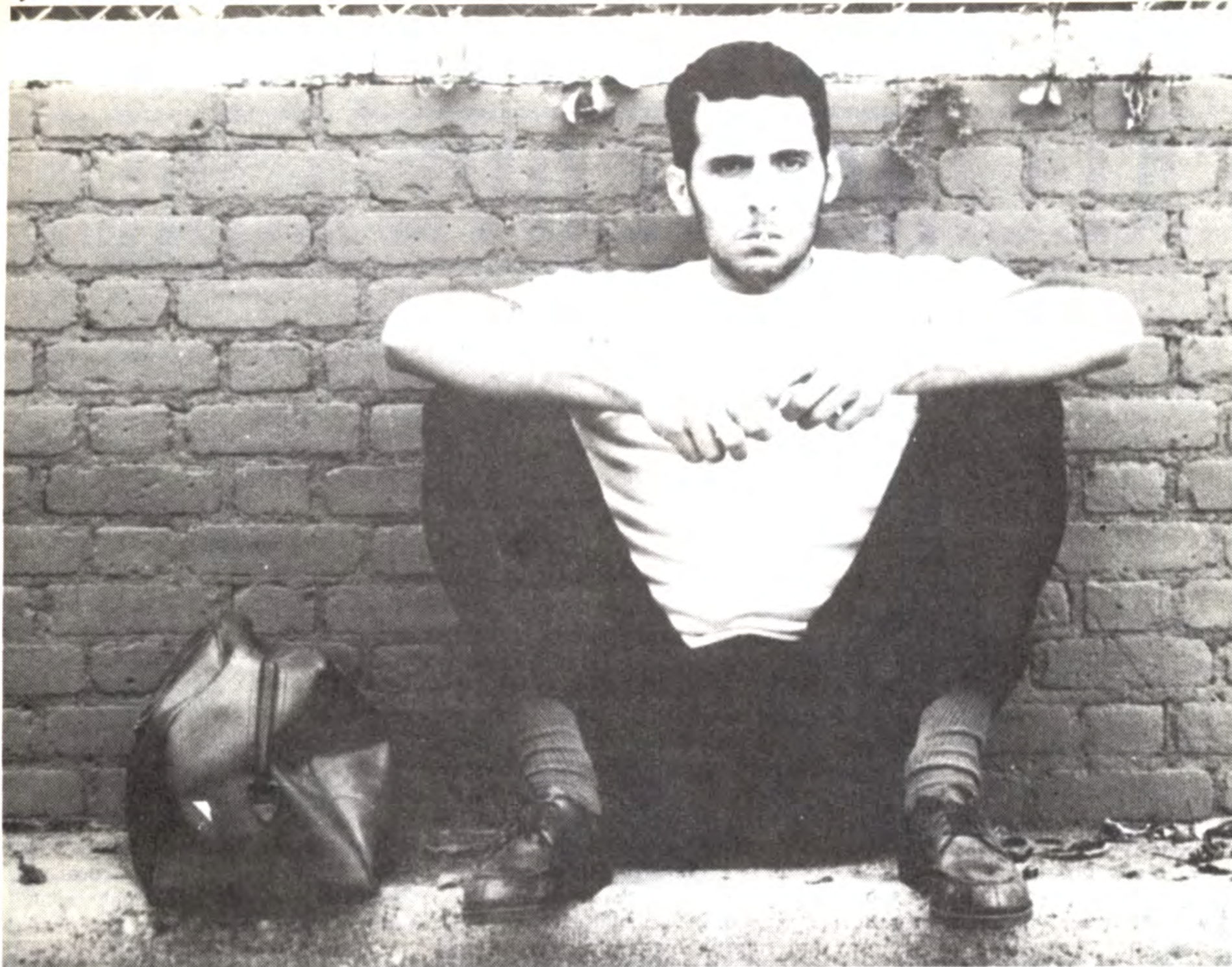
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## ERRATUM

The last issue of *CineAction!* was incorrectly  
identified on the inside front cover as  
#12/13. The special double issue was  
correctly identified on the cover as #13/14.

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## from the editor

AS SOME OF YOU may have noticed, *CineAction!* has tended, so far, to be somewhat schizophrenic, shifting in tone and ideological positioning from issue to issue. Up to now, two different members of the editorial collective have been responsible for each issue (choosing a 'theme,' soliciting articles, and so on), lending that issue to some degree its own character. What has emerged from this method is a realization that although we're all situated somewhere 'left of centre,' there is certainly no real ideological uniformity among all the collective members. So in order to foreground these differences, which have only been addressed *between*, and never really *within*, issues, we've decided to devote this *CineAction!* to articles

only by collective members, intended to define, either implicitly or explicitly, their critical position.

For this issue, then, my duties as 'editor' have been reduced largely to picking the colour (orange) and bugging people for their articles. I'm not about to attempt to sort out or comment on the various debates — I'll leave that to the reader. I just hope the attacks and fights that this issue on Interpretation has produced will boost our sales!

I should also mention that our next issue will be focused on Canadian film and video, and we encourage outside contributions.

**Bryan Bruce**

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# FALLING LOVE AGAIN

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## Notes on Film Criticism and *Marlene*

by Florence Jacobowitz  
& Richard Lippe

### CLEARING THE AIR

IT is September 1988 and we are sketching out a series of points outlining both a current position and plans for the practical application of these ideas in upcoming issues of *CineAction!*. In line with one of the most fundamental premises upon which *CineAction!* was initially conceived, we will try to be clear and accessible at the risk of seeming overly naive about concerns which are 'obvious' and not at all in style — what is 'in' style is too elusive to pin down anyway. Film theory has been, and remains, enslaved to the latest and the newer than new trends in elitist cultural theory, headed by a succession of contemporary versions of what used to be called gurus, busy consolidating capital-producing empires founded upon impenetrable mazes of reconstructed English. The actual film in question is lost and buried beneath epistemological complexes masking any further, practicable discussion. Our concerns here are not to promote an abandonment of theory, but gently to recommend that criticism be re-introduced with the kind of rigour that has been the privileged domain of theory, opening up a dialogue with those not already enmeshed in the labyrinthian hermeneutics of contemporary theory. Criticism has been left behind because it cannot be objective, and the attempts to scientificize criti-

cism in the distant past (à la Metz, Bellour, etc.) have drained a complicated experience involving emotional and subjective responses of precisely that. We find ourselves dazzled by the formal pyrotechnics underlying, for example, Bellour's work on Hitchcock and the Hollywood 'machine' producing the 'couple,' but at the same time, this kind of neat critical creativity, however admirable, never seems to match one's experience of watching the film. If we are singling out Bellour as an easy target, it is because his work exemplifies an extreme of a by now accepted tradition which claims that Hollywood films basically follow a studio system grid producing commodified sameness: i.e. bourgeois capitalist ideology at its most transparent. A recent approach (like that of the Bordwell/Thompson school) is equally hesitant to acknowledge that criticism must address those elements which slip through the structures of form and style that constitute *the* classical Hollywood narrative. These elements, created by tone, atmosphere, emotional identification, attitudes to gender, etc., have been more successfully recognized and addressed within feminist criticism. However, here too, the need to be validated has produced theoretical positions which ignore, ironically, some of feminism's central tenets: i.e. that the personal response must be foregrounded and de-marginalized, and that a collective social experience, like that resulting from group spectatorship, can be a useful way of articulating needs and pleasures which remain un-addressed otherwise in a larger social

arena. We should add here our conviction that mainstream film, however compromised by its condition of production, remains a significant forum for political engagement; that is not to suggest our rejection of alternative cultural forms of expression or forms of production outside of the mainstream. We *are* saying that the distinctions of 'high' and 'low' art (within a scale of political correctness) is arranged too simply around this mainstream/alternative dichotomy. In fact, these distinctions are a carry-over of traditional intellectual snobishness and the general disdain for popular culture, evidenced, prominently, in the Frankfurt school.

Not only are we *not* embarrassed by narrative realist cinema, but, dare we say it, we do experience deeply-felt pleasures and enjoyments resulting from a complex of factors: the intelligence and sophistication of works created by numerous stars, writers, directors, whose contributions, both individually and collectively, remain rich in the way they challenge and excite; the endless play of permutations within the form of narrative realism; the possibilities of communicating significant meaningful stories within a familiar language. The fact that art is business is not, and never should have been, an insurmountable barrier to dealing with Hollywood; after all, what today is *not* business and which idea is ultimately non-commodifiable and hence, unsullied? Besides, we love movies; this is not meant to be facetious, but we question the motivation behind much theoretical film discussion today. One senses a need



Glamour photograph, 1940s.

to 'deal with' a reprehensible artform as part of a politically correct crusade and an intellectual knowingness — i.e. we won't be conned by this and we will have the last word. At least André Bazin's writings expressed his genuine commitment to and affection for the medium. Despite the shortcomings of Bazin's position, his integrity remains intact, unlike much of what passes for film criticism.

This fear of being duped or taken in by the suturing effects of narrative realism remains the basis for the continual disavowal of pleasure. The idea that realist fictional narratives construct a male-identified spectator-position which works to secure and legitimize masculine dominance, is by now an undisputed tenet. In contradistinction, we propose the following: the *activity* of spectatorship is just that — an active participation in meaning production. While the workings of identification are clearly central to the experience of representation and narrative cinema, the discussion of the mechanisms involved deserve elaboration, as contemporary feminist theorists have recognized. However, the notion of a socially conscious and aware spectator has been grossly overlooked in favour of the privileging of the psycho-analytic play of 'desire,' which denies the spectator's creative intelligence and the possibility of a dynamic interaction with the processes of representation. In addition, these theories have consolidated a distinct elitist division between the knowing critic and the mass audience in need of being saved and enlightened. The crudely formulated notions of Realism underpinning much of contemporary film theory compound the difficulties of surmounting these problems. The complex conventions of narrative realism are denied and dismissed in favour of the firmly-held belief that spectatorship is a mystifying experience wherein the viewer can only succumb to the seductive pull of the narrative or reject it in its entirety. This either/or position neglects the possibility of the spectator's close participation in an experience combined with his/her ability to remain critically discerning of the play of style.

The extent to which the realist narrative is a highly performed and heightened mode of discourse has remained persistently and wilfully ignored. Strategies such as irony, the heightened deployment of generic conventions, the creative use of various acting styles and star personas complicate what is taken to be simplistic, straightforward representation. Realist cinema, often the pro-

duct of highly aware sensibilities, is remarkably undervalued, unaccredited and dismissed as naive and formulaic. This argument has been taken up in a variety of articles in past issues of *CineAction!*, most recently in the film noir issue, and fully deserves the attention it has received because the films and stars continue to inform and be relevant to cultural production. Again, we are not indifferent to contemporary work produced outside of mainstream production; however, we refuse to accede to the pressures of contemporary theoretical fads which denigrate mass, commodified entertainment. What is particularly infuriating about this wholesale rejection is that it has been perpetrated in the name of radical politics which dismisses completely ideologically tainted products of the oppressors. This sanctimonious ban on mainstream culture is, at base, a cover for a theoretical position which is neither political nor particularly progressive as it refuses to acknowledge the social realities which inform popular culture.

We suspect that the capacities inherent in narrative cinema — to move and give pleasure — are fundamental to this debate. Because the experience directly engages one's emotions, it has been assumed that a loss of awareness and control is effected through the processes of identification and the unfolding of the narrative. Under this assumption, one is divested of one's intellectual and critical faculties, and left at the mercy of potential indoctrination at the hands of a monolithic bourgeois power structure. Cultural theory has committed itself to the role of exposing this emotional manipulation in its adamant refusal to be seduced. We contend that there is a vast difference between passive manipulation and an engagement which may be emotional but not exclusively, or at the expense of an intellectual response.

Allowing oneself to be moved by a work of art invites the risk of vulnerability — awakening needs/desires/pleasures which are often unacknowledged and denied. The masculinist impulse underlying this theory ensures the repression of contradictory responses which are evoked. By denying the emotional pull of narrative cinema, one is, in fact, expressing the desire to remain safely in control. The strategy of rejecting realist narratives on the grounds of their supposed manipulation of the spectator's emotions and suppression of a critical reading becomes a mistaken justification for wanting to avoid any deeply-experienced involvement with the narrative. Instead, the spectator is

comfortably distanced from the story through devices such as a heavily cynical tone and self-referential comments that signal a smug knowingness, setting up a discourse between the film and the audience which provides an uncomplicated access to the facile meaning of the work. The films ensure their popularity by flattering the audience. The tongue-in-cheek/pastiche attitude reiterated in these works acts as a protective cover and passes for sophisticated entertainment. David Lynch, the Coen brothers, David Byrne's *True Stories* and their derivatives are exemplary of this routine. Another component of this trend is the resurgence of the intentionally obvious 'happy ending' and the disappearance of the ambiguous hero figure (the notion of ambiguity is anathema to this style). Meaning becomes clear and assured. The meagre simplicity of the material avoids complexity and ambiguity. The desire to repeatedly remind the audience that they are witnessing a fictional construct becomes an attempt to deflect from a deeper involvement characteristic of realist cinema at its best, which can combine distancing devices, excess, elements of camp, etc. with a profoundly genuine commitment to its subject matter and concerns. The desperate need to remain detached evidenced in these 'post-modern' films is not premised upon Brechtian notions of critical awareness; it is linked to the desire to control the filmic experience by draining away its importance and keeping it relegated to the periphery of culture. Popular entertainment should not, after all, take itself too seriously — it would be less easy to dismiss the social experiences it advertently or inadvertently raises.

## MAXIMILIAN SCHELL'S MARLENE (1984)

**WE** have chosen to illustrate our polemic through a brief discussion of the film *Marlene*. We have selected *Marlene* instead of a fictional narrative film because it explores one of the most undertheorized areas of film study by asking, How does a present-day spectator respond to a complicated, multi-layered star persona? The discussion of stars and acting, like that of authorship, is not conducive to contemporary trends in film scholarship. It eludes a rigid formalist reading and cannot be dissected easily. Because an investigation of the star phenomenon is closely linked to theorising the spectator's emotional interaction and identification with a character, its omission

leaves a crucial gap in our understanding of the functioning of realist narratives. We also want to draw attention to *Marlene* because the film has yet to receive the recognition it merits. The fact that the film is categorized as a documentary automatically ensures it a marginal position. In addition, Schell's unorthodox presentation and structuring of the subject matter obstructs an easy accessibility to the issues being raised. (This becomes clearer in comparison to a film like Dale/Cole's *Calling the Shots*, which, to its credit, is straightforward and direct yet flattens out the complex concerns it takes on through a well-meaning but repetitive cataloguing of the opinions of a variety of women film directors.) Though *Marlene* is ostensibly a documentary on the Dietrich legend, it raises questions concerning significance of the star's persona within popular culture, and moves to a conclusion which admits to the film's inability to come to any easy or satisfying resolutions. It is the investigative process itself, undertaken by both the film-makers and the audience, which intrigues and challenges one to rethink the complex responses stars elicit.

There is a tradition in our culture which expresses an ambivalent attitude towards stars. There are conflicting impulses of strong attraction coupled with a need to denigrate the star and his/her image to compensate for their seemingly unwarranted professional success. As a result, personal problems become magnified and emphasized; because identification is a key factor in our relation to the star and the narrative, the public demands an equal amount of suffering to balance the rewards of the profession. The work process involved in creating and maintaining a persona becomes invisible as a result of the culture's valuing of an 'effortless,' seamless and naturalized performance. 'Serious' actors, like Olivier, Dustin Hoffman or Maximilian Schell, for example, deserve their accolades because they earn their due. This argument is central to one's reading of Schell's film. On the one hand, the filmmaker has clearly chosen to investigate the truth behind Dietrich the person and the legend, because of the intense magnetism embodied in her image. On the other hand, Schell is intent upon demystifying the image and exposing the 'real' person behind it — a lonely, embittered, elderly woman. This demystification expresses the public's desire to regain some control over the intense emotional output invested in the star. In addition, these revelations serve to



Dietrich in concert, 1960s.

prove the ideological dictum that success has its price, particularly for women.

Schell's masculinist perspective reinforces these cultural undercurrents despite his willingness to acknowledge the frustrations and anxieties he encounters in the process of making the film. The questions Schell puts to Dietrich attempt to correlate the woman and her professional identity, seeking to isolate elements of reality which substantiate the fictional construct. This desire to extract The Truth behind the illusion is a gendered one. It is premised on the archaic notion that women, and particularly female actresses, masterfully practice the art of deception. This is a form of empowerment which is both desirable (the ideal woman is offered onscreen

and one interacts with her profoundly through the narrative) and threatening, as she does not exist except as a collection of images and characters. Dietrich *does* exist and that is precisely why the film is being made and why it becomes obsessive in its probing of her personal life. The film's central confrontation revolves around Dietrich's unwillingness to have herself displayed and interrogated. (Ironically, this is what makes her filmic persona so attractive in the first place.) She denied Schell his request to have herself or her apartment and belongings photographed for the film. Dietrich offers, instead, her voice, and acquiesces in answering questions primarily related to her professional career, emphasized through her repeated insistence that she and Schell



**Witness for the Prosecution**, production still, 1957.

honour the contractual conditions agreed to prior to the making of the film. Throughout the film, Dietrich stresses that the project is a business venture and she treats it as such. She disturbs the myth of the documentary film-maker and the tradition of celebrity interviews which are constructed upon an artificial intimacy. The interviewer is empowered through his/her function to question and uncover the real person behind the public image. In *Marlene*, Schell frequently cuts back and forth between stills and footage of Dietrich's private life; for example, shots of her and her husband are intercut with shots from the wedding sequence in Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*. This editing device is suggestive of connections/contrasts between the personal identity and the screen image; however, the film hesitates to clarify precisely what conclusions are to be drawn. Schell implies that, because Dietrich is a cultural icon, she is appropriable and should be available for this critical investigation. Die-

trich resists the commodification of her private identity and suggests that her public career is all that needs to be discussed. The film questions Dietrich's separation of the public and private through its juxtaposition of Dietrich's present voice and footage which belies the claims now being made. These include shots of her in earlier interviews claiming she never argues, claims that she is never lonely, claims of being an only child, and claims that her artistic career began with Sternberg, etc., etc. The truth Schell reveals is that she does argue, she is lonely, she had a sister and she made films prior to those with Sternberg. The footage used also attests to the fact that an icon is a carefully constructed product — for example, we see shots of Dietrich distributing publicity stills to her fans, etc. The many clips from her final concert focus on the value being placed on the image by both Dietrich and her public and the precision taken to achieve this relationship. All these contradictions question Die-

trich's insistence that she was not contributing to the mythification of her image.

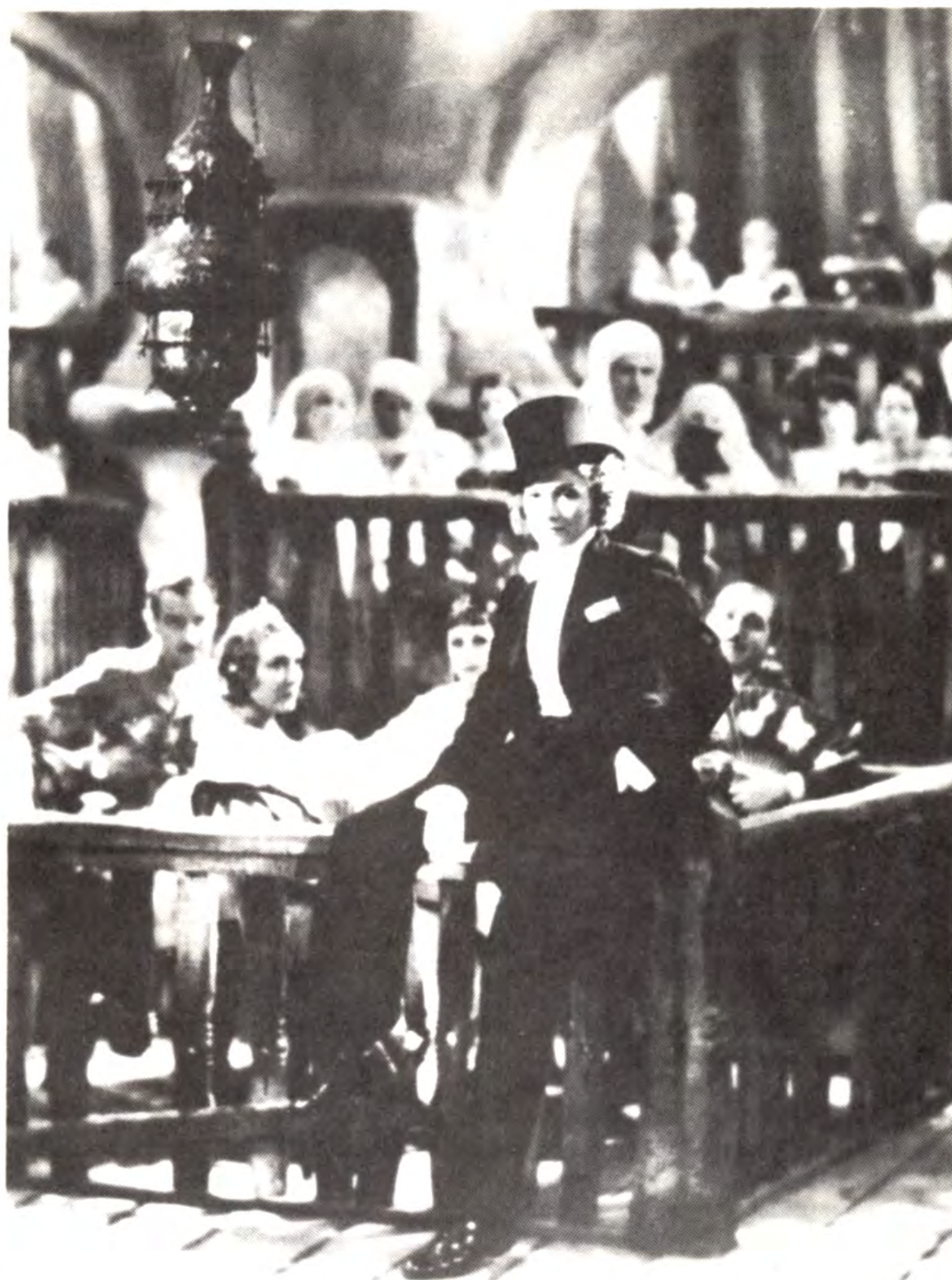
These inconsistencies, and the attempts to expose them, ultimately do little to elucidate the potency of Dietrich's public persona. Although the film evidences an awareness of and, to a degree, admiration for Dietrich's accomplishment, this regard also produces tensions which the film cannot contain within its frame of reference and quest for masculine notions of truth and order.

The outstanding qualities which comprise the Dietrich star persona on and offscreen — her determination, her courageous political intervention on the part of the American Allies during the war, her extraordinary professional career and her ability to defy conventions regarding a woman's role in a patriarchal culture, etc. — are remarkable. Dietrich shatters the film's project, which is to deconstruct the process of star mystification. The complex history of Dietrich's image overextends the

attempt to defuse its strength through this deductive interpretation. The metaphor of the Dietrich puzzle perfectly encapsulates the dilemma that the film ultimately finds itself in. The strength of this provocative film lies in its ability to admit a certain defeat — Schell's puzzle falls apart. Schell alludes to this in the discussion of Orson Welles where the Rosebud sequences from *Citizen Kane* are used to complement the soundtrack, his point being that unravelling the mystery of an identity is impossible. The film's admission that the 'real Marlene' cannot be extracted from the construction is admirable; nevertheless, Schell is determined to conclude with a climactic revelation of one aspect of Dietrich's identity. Dietrich's star persona is integrally associated with strength, tenacity, control, and discipline. Her final breakdown — the poem she and Schell recite has evoked strong emotions and she is crying — suggests that she is also sentimental and vulnerable. This finale is Schell's coup in that he has succeeded in violating Dietrich's defiant resistance to a public expression of a deeply-felt personal moment.

The concluding sequence is disturbing for a number of reasons. It reiterates Schell's masculinist politics which inform aspects of the film. Proving Dietrich's vulnerability challenges her long-standing transgressive disruption of gender rules. This is not to suggest that she has adopted a masculine persona. Dietrich's image, despite her identification with cross-dressing, is not androgynous as has often been claimed. Dietrich retains aspects of her femininity but defies gender stereotypes by incorporating empowering male traits as evidenced in her activity and strong resistance to a position of submission. The emotional 'breakdown' serves to reclaim Dietrich within traditional stereotypes of femininity, and thus undermines her potency. In addition, the commodification of Dietrich's persona was greatly dependent upon her erotic glamour; unlike Katharine Hepburn for instance, who is defined, primarily, as an actress and continues to act, Dietrich's age has effectively removed her from the marketplace. Female stars, unlike male stars, have a limited career span as so much of their potency is dependent upon the youthful body. Schell is well aware of these limitations and exploits them in capturing Dietrich's sense of loss during their reciting of the poem.

The poem is extremely moving because it expresses profound feelings of regret, the passing of time and the



inability to alter what has been. The fact that Dietrich is moved by the poem and the reminiscences it evokes is not particularly meaningful because the poem's thematic elicits an emotional response from any spectator who has considered or experienced the complex social attitudes towards aging and dying. Schell is complicit in exploiting consensual fears and prejudices by suggesting that this legendary woman has been made impotent and has been reduced to an ordinary person through processes like aging which affect us all.

The resurgence of the cultural tensions surrounding stars is again evident — stars articulate social needs, pleasures and fantasies which are desirable because they transgress and appear to

defy dominant norms; at the same time the threatening ramifications of these responses must be diffused. Although the film structurally avoids imposing strict closure to the Dietrich puzzle, the ending thinly veils a desire to restrain the threatening social and cultural implications Dietrich's star persona inspires. □

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# THE CRITIC'S CHOICE:

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## ■ THINGS GREAT

### — and Things not so Great —

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by Janine Marchessault

In what follows, I will be discussing some of the positions and assumptions that were foregrounded in the last issue of *CineAction!* (#13/14). Specifically, I will be addressing Richard Lippe and Robin Wood's editorial preface — their call for a renewed emphasis on classical Hollywood cinema — as well as Andrew Britton's "The Myth of Postmodernism: The Bourgeois Intelligentsia in the Age of Reagan." In doing this I hope to clarify, what are for me, some of the most pressing cultural and political concerns facing any magazine of (radical) film criticism and theory in Canada.

I must state in advance that the aim of my dis-

cussion is not to provide an answer *once and for all* to the question of 'radical' film criticism and practice. Nor do I want to participate in the kind of male academic jockeying that so often characterizes such undertakings. Having been identified (indirectly) in Lippe and Wood's preface as being among those who would champion alternative films and videos "which few have heard of," I am all too wary of being instated as 'other' to a dominant *One*. Nonetheless, if the primary objective behind this issue of *CineAction!* is to express our differences in order to identify new questions, the result can only be constructively contentious.

## I. The Great Tradition of Either/Or

The question of *CineAction!*'s "emphasis" is posed in Lippe and Wood's "Policy and Politics" as a question of either/or:

- *either* classical Hollywood Cinema and mainstream cinema which everyone has access to and which "reflects the general movement of our own culture;"
- *or* alternative forms of film and video "which few have heard of, fewer have seen, and most have little chance of seeing"

Rather strategically, Trotsky and Marx are crucial appendages to Lippe and Wood's argument:

"We recall that Marx repeatedly expressed his respect for the great achievements of bourgeois culture, and that Trotsky argued that revolutionary art must appropriate for its own uses the forms of bourgeois art." (p. 2)

Given that Trotsky was working in the wake of a successful revolution (i.e. an entirely different socio-economic context — not capitalism), as well as contending with mass-illiteracy, he is not the most relevant figure to conjure up. Using Marx as a means to support an argument for classical Hollywood cinema is, surely, more than a little suspect. The fundamental absence of a theory of art in Marx's writings has, on the left, given rise to a long history of rivaling interpretations. Would that it be only as simple as: 'well, Marx liked bourgeois tradition . . .'

Without these proper names, however, Lippe and Wood's argument — their "species of radicalism" — might indeed appear to be lacking a politic. For while minimizing the importance of radically alternative practices in the light that these cannot hope to displace the hegemony of a dominant culture "within any foreseeable future," Lippe and Wood neither offer nor entertain an alternative. Their answer that "the classical Hollywood cinema has not been adequately accounted for" might lead a lazy reader to suppose that the opposition to capitalist society and its dominant practices is no longer necessary — not really thinkable within any foreseeable future. I must however, (and will shortly) give the editors more credit than this because, indeed, it all comes too close to the kind of postmodern politics that they, along with Andrew Britton, deplore.

Nonetheless, to pose the question of criticism and 'radical' cultural practice

in terms of "the great either/or" is to reduce a series of different historical struggles and institutional contexts to zero. Moreover, while acknowledging the importance of their critical enterprise, accounting for classical Hollywood cinema — in Canada, in 1988 — remains for me, an academic undertaking. I cannot for even a moment think that one more interpretation of *Vertigo* — no matter how radical, no matter how *great* the film — is going to change the social formation. Comrades, let us define our terms.

## II. The Great Canon

The merging of a traditional class politic with the recuperation of the great western tradition may seem strange at first. However, on second glance we realize that we are faced with, what is for the left, a familiar trope: the old "art for the people" versus "art for art's sake," autonomy versus commitment, realism versus modernism, the inside versus the margins, popular culture versus the avant-garde, etc. Historically these debates take the form of antinomy — each side has something to say, but neither provides a completely satisfactory position.

One of the most sophisticated embodiments of such debates is found in the exchanges between Walter Benjamin and T.W. Adorno in the '30s. Called upon to function in different historical and social junctures, their different views continue to inspire new questions about the relation between revolutionary politics and art in the West. I bring them up here, not merely to reproduce their opposition but, rather, to ground our questions about criticism and practice historically without, at the same time, forsaking the particularities of where we live.

In many respects Andrew Britton's article "The Myth of Postmodernism" (*CineAction!* #13/14) speaks to these debates and introduces them to a third term: "postmodernism." Where many have used this third term to conflate the different positions held by Adorno and Benjamin — through the postmodernist claim to embody the characteristics of both popular culture and high art — Britton does not. Intent on demonstrating how postmodernism (its discourses and its art) is antithetical to real political struggle, Britton sets it against a tradition of high modernism.

High modernism for Britton is not to be understood in Adorno's sense of the word — defined through the contradictions of "autonomous" art works (con-

tradictory because nothing is autonomous) which radically challenge dominant culture by resisting its forms and pleasures. In contrast to Adorno's thesis that, Britton insists that *Blonde Venus*, for example, is "evidence that 'high modernism' could, and once did, exist as a viable popular culture." (p. 16) Thus, Britton sees high modernism as a tradition which includes (among others) the work of Schoenberg, Brecht and the best of Classical Hollywood Cinema.

Britton laments the fact that "contemporary bourgeois artists are conspicuously unwilling to commit themselves to the political positions which, in late 20th century, are indispensable prerequisites of significant opposition to capitalist society." While he never specifies what these "indispensable prerequisites" are or might be, we are given some indication in his next sentence: "If we have no Schoenberg in 1988, it is . . . because this *kind* of intervention absolutely depends on the presence of an audience which is passionately concerned to hear something else . . ."

Britton's self-satisfied condescension is, in itself, part of a great tradition — that of Reaction. Blaming the decline of bourgeois high culture on "yuppies" and postmodern artists (p. 14) is rather like blaming the harbinger for the doom. Britton knows very well that the opposition and challenges of all works of art cannot have the same effect in all places, on all audiences, for all time. The fact that the "great" modern works are now only *tolerated negativity* is evidence not of "the contemporary bourgeoisie's loathsome philistine indifference to its own cultural past." It is evidence rather, of the institutionalization of art works through the canonical rod of the Great Tradition. At the moment that Schoenberg's work became "A Schoenberg," commodified and accounted for like a piece of designer clothing, it ceased to comprise political resistance.

The problem that faces many artists who are committed to cultural intervention is not simply one of the relation between culture and commodity but the massive institutionalization of resistance. Things are where they belong through a process of calculated dissemination: mainstream narrative cinema in mainstream theatres, videotapes in parallel galleries, avant-garde films in underground or alternative movie houses, etc. Artists might in fact manage to produce an intervention within their ideologically assigned riding but never far beyond it.

We cannot, however, use the problem

of dissemination (which is by no means new but has grown more pronounced) as justification for a critical enterprise. That is, as Lippe and Wood argue, giving more emphasis to those films which most have access to. Wouldn't the investigation of the institutional structures of dissemination be more politically productive?

One might assume from the rhetoric that Britton employs — "the indispensable prerequisites of significant opposition" — that he is calling for just this kind of investigation. But what sounds like a revolutionary call to cultural arms, is really just a bizarre nostalgia for the Great Tradition.

Lippe and Wood's desire to account for this Great Tradition, their stress on classical Hollywood cinema, their belittlement of "this or that avant-garde" is given theoretical and historical justification in Britton's article. In "The Myth of Postmodernism" what is an important academic and critical enterprise becomes *our only alternative*. What was at least an historical binarism in Lippe and Wood's preface becomes an (to use Britton's terminology) "un- or (better) *anti-Historical*" hodgepodge of Britton's favourite artists. Classical Hollywood cinema becomes part of the tradition which produced the revolutionary politics of Brecht and the radical aesthetic forms of Schoenberg. In contrast to this, Britton maintains that the contemporary avant-garde is comprised of politically corrupt philistines (i.e. postmodern artists). Consequently, he closes his argument with a choice: *Dynasty* or recent Godard. (You can't get much closer to postmodern cynicism than that.) It all boils down to a question of mainstream culture versus the 'postmodern' avant-garde — which has set itself apart only to better its reactionary laughter (Godard has the audacity to make fun of Shakespeare). In Britton's formulation, there would seem to be no place left for revolutionary struggle, for cultural opposition to capitalism or even to the reactionary yuppies. How can we see our way clear? We are provided with some direction:

Popular culture is in no sense reducible to the capitalist media, and even contemporary commercial entertainment — though it is difficult to think of it, given the nature of the economic conditions, as producing the equivalent of a Hitchcock — retains a greater energy, and a greater potential for generating contradiction and resistance, than the airless world of bourgeois art described by Douglas Crimp. (pp. 16-17)

So things are clearer now: whereas the commercial culture produced a Hitchcock, the avant-garde has produced the likes of General Idea and recent Godard. One is left with the impression that there is nothing in between classical Hollywood cinema and the postmodern avant-garde (not that I would place Godard there). Were this true, when looking back to the Great Tradition might indeed provide us with our only consolation.

### III. The Great Utopic Kernel

Britton directs his attacks against the 'yuppies' and 'postmodernists' because his analysis fails to take in account the *institutions* of cultural production and reception. Where else can he turn? It is for this reason that he can locate similar "tendencies" in Schoenberg, Brecht, and classical Hollywood cinema. It is also for this reason that he can offer no alternative to postmodernism but *Dynasty*. While I agree with him that the tradition of bourgeois culture is "profoundly contradictory" and we cannot simply theorize an emancipatory potential for it, we can — as he seems to want to — try to understand certain historical tendencies and moments. All this in order to better understand: "What is to be done now?"

The now classical debate between Adorno and Benjamin, between autonomy and commitment, has everything to do with 'where' and 'how' art is experienced; it has everything to do with the very important differences between Schoenberg and Brecht. The work of the Russian Constructivists and Formalists (especially Meyerhold, Eisenstein, Tretyakov and Mayakovsky) for example — which so influenced Brecht's own ideas about political art — cannot be reduced to the tradition of bourgeois high-culture.

It is important, as Peter Burger has convincingly demonstrated in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, to distinguish between Modernism (Aestheticism) and the 20th century revolutionary avant-garde. While the modernist work remains enclosed within historically sanctioned institutions for its reception, concerned primarily with the aesthetic realm of experience, the impulses of the avant-garde have always been to do away with the institution of "art" completely. Their objective was to make art *mean* something again by integrating it into the praxis of everyday life. Here lies Brecht's interest in the cinema. His famous remark that it is better to start from the "bad new things" rather than

"the good old ones" is a defense of the emancipatory potential of the cinema. Though cluttered with the contradictions of commercial culture, he argued, the cinema might nonetheless be re-directed towards a revolutionary end:

This apparatus can be used better than almost anything else to supersede the old kind of untechnical, anti-technical 'glowing' art, with its religion links. The socialization of these means is vital for art. (*Brecht On Theatre*, p. 70)

The 'desacrilization' of the author/artist does not have its strongest advocate in Barthes nor in the 'postmodern nihilists,' but in Mayakovsky. This was never meant to turn writers into "zombies"; on the contrary, it was intended to do away with the excessive mythos surrounding the production of "glowing art" and "great artist" which turned readers and writers alike into uncritical zombies. The utilitarian tenets of Formalism and Constructivism sought to liquidate the distinction between pure and applied art and between artist and worker only the better to implicate art and artists in the social realities around them. This was all part of a movement to democratize social relationships and social structures.

If Brecht and Benjamin located a utopic strain in the cinema, it was precisely because it had very little to do with bourgeois high culture. While high art demanded private contemplation, the cinema displaced the context and reception of the art work into a public and collectivized domain. Like André Bazin after them, and not for entirely different reasons, both Benjamin and Brecht stressed the communicative capabilities of the cinema — its photographic ontology — as the path to a new political aesthetic that would be intelligible to all. Here, the "critical and receptive attitude" could be made to coincide.

In a capitalist system which opposes pleasure to work, this 'coinciding' continues to be a central problem for politically committed artists: how to mediate the fundamentally contradictory impulses of pleasure and cognition. Such a synthesis might well be the utopic ideal for a political cultural practice. But as we know from history, this ideality cannot simply be imported and imposed on any context. The task for us would be to rigorously specify the historical, economic, and ideological context through which a radical cultural politics, its standards and its values, might take on concrete meaning in practice.

#### iv. The Great Revolutionary Tradition

Andrew Britton's critique of postmodernism and some of its excesses is an important one. I cannot but agree with Britton that capitalism (multinational/late) continues to be a material process (not a 'narrative') and is as such "analyzable." (p. 17) The problem that I have encountered with Britton's analysis is that in his haste to do away with the postmodern "visionaries" once and for all, he becomes embarrassingly inimical and unjudicious. Running roughshod over the very important differences between the Frankfurt School, post-structuralism, deconstruction and postmodernism as if they were all part of some secret conspiracy — "The Bourgeois Intelligentsia in the Age of Reagan." This does not do justice to the tools Britton maintains are best provided by Marxist Socialism. In the same way that Marxism cannot be reduced to Stalinism and Hollywood cannot be reduced to the culture industry — post-structuralism, deconstruction and postmodernism cannot be reduced to "the airless world of bourgeois art."

While the task of extending Britton's critique and defending certain post-structuralist enterprises would demand a much lengthier discussion than can be undertaken here, I would like to clarify a few misconceptions.

Michael Ryan's *Deconstruction and Marxism* (1982) has taken great pains to show that any critique of deconstruction must begin by distinguishing between Derrida's work and the practices of some of his keener right-wing acolytes at Yale. Derrida has been highly critical of the American versions of deconstruction which have taken his anti-empiricist statement "there is nothing beyond the text" to its most ridiculous textual extremes. Moreover, although his work is directly related to uncovering exclusions and challenging hierarchies of meaning, Derrida is no pluralist, insisting, instead, that pluralism, in its exclusion of the possibility of exclusion, is just as totalizing as the hegemonic discourses it sets itself up against. Furthermore, Derrida has maintained that deconstruction is a political tool which must address "solid structures, 'material' institutions and not only . . . discourses or signifying representations" (*The Truth in Painting*, p.19).

This last point has been important for those undertakings — feminist practices notwithstanding — which have directed deconstruction towards political rather than textual ends. The work of dislodg-

ing binary opposition and uncovering oppressive and totalizing epistemologies — certain forms of Marxism notwithstanding — does not necessarily lead to a rejection of epistemology or truth as Britton seems to infer. Rather, it has, for a socialist feminism in particular, led to an understanding that structures of power, political interventions and subjectivity must be thought differently — that truth itself must be grounded in an historical material conjuncture.

Britton's assertion that "the autonomous struggles of women, blacks and gays" cannot be reduced to class struggle but will not be achieved without it (p. 8), is all too familiar. Under the guise of protecting "the new social movements" against those postmodern theorists who would use them merely to avoid the *real* struggle, Britton writes:

. . . it is certainly pleasant to cheer oneself up by claiming that the workers are no longer up to it, were probably never up to it in the first place, and that the "new social movements" will get the job done in record time by formulating anti-foundationalist democratic demands which the capitalist state will promptly meet. The reason for concerning oneself with this simple-minded fantasy is its catastrophic implications for concrete political strategy — implications which, as it happens, might be construed already: for all the anti-Stalinist invective of its proponents, "postmodern politics" is essentially Stalinist popular frontism under a different name. The "new social movements" deserve rather a better fate than to be co-opted as propaganda for a thrilling re-make of *that* ill-fated adventure. (p. 9)

Britton's critique recalls Perry Anderson's swift dismissal of post-structuralism in *In The Tracks Of Historical Materialism* (1984). Equally striking in both Britton and Anderson is their *benign* insinuation that, while important, 'other' struggles (the feminist movement in particular) are somewhat diffuse and by no means have the collective force of organized labour. But where Anderson is kind enough to allow for the possibility of a socialist movement which is "plural in composition," Britton insists on his orthodoxy: above all else class struggle — we'll take care of the 'other' oppressions later . . . Once again we are up against the Great Either (traditional Marxism)/ Or (Stalinism: postmodern politics) — with nothing in between.

While women are used to being told

that they have *nothing in between* . . . — history has taught us otherwise. The feminist insistence on contextualization, specificity and difference does not constitute a rejection of the historical configuration of capitalism in general. Contrary to what Britton suggests, the (not uncritical) meeting of feminism and certain branches of post-structuralism has generated a radical awareness of the necessary interrelation between gender, race and class. "The personal is political" has been taken by many feminists to mean that gender and sexuality are *not autonomous* but exist in and through a social order. For this reason, as Teresa de Lauretis argues: "the notion of gender, or 'sexual difference,' cannot be simply accommodated into the preexisting, ungendered (or male-gendered) categories by which the official discourses on race and class have been elaborated . . ." (*Technologies of Gender*, p. 139). The radical transformation of capitalism, of its social relations, cannot take place separately from the transformation of patriarchal society. Otherwise, what is at risk is just another sequel to *our* "ill-fated adventure."

#### v. Things That Are Not So Great

That there has always been something reactionary in the left pessimism characteristic of Adorno and after him Jean Baudrillard and Arthur Kroker is without doubt. This does not mean however, that they have nothing to tell us, or that they are simply reacting to fictions of their own making. Indeed, they are reacting to very different and very real historical circumstances. The Frankfurt School theorists were writing in the wake of Nazism, and Adorno's question 'how can we write lyrical poetry after Auschwitz' is not without significant moral and political implications which have something to do with the danger of forgetting. Jean Baudrillard's work must be read through the tattered hopes of May 1968 in Paris, and the failure of French Marxism to secure 'the' revolution. His 'simulated real' is the mark of this loss. Arthur Kroker is writing in Canada and is responding to certain cultural statistics which have something to do with imperialism.

Baudrillard, Kroker and, I might add, Godard are not the postmodern cynics that Britton describes. Like Adorno, they are profoundly negative in a modern sense. And in a modern sense means that the extreme negativity of their hermetic works reveals an anti-thesis: the

desire and the hope for a better future.

That Britton dismisses Kroker's "horror show" on the basis that the social conditions it describes are "wrong" (p. 17) is somewhat understandable in the sense that Kroker does have a flair for the dramatic. However, the conditions that he and Michael Dorland describe as "the absolute domination of parasitism plus" (*CineAction!*, # 10 p. 5) are accurate. Here, they are referring to certain cultural realities, particular to Canada, with which Britton is perhaps not familiar: the fact that 97 per cent of Canadian screen time is allotted to American cinema; the fact that 95 per cent of these box office receipts goes back into American production; the fact that 95 per cent of Canadian television drama is American; the fact that Canada has never had the opportunity to develop a proper distribution system because American distributors have had monopolies on our theatres for over half a century; the fact that there is little hope for change given that our policy makers have always in the last instance refused to impose quotas for fear of American 'retaliation'; the fact (finally) that we are the only country in the world in which this situation exists to such a degree that I am told the expression "Canadianization of the film industry" has been used as a synonym, in other countries, for American Cultural Imperialism. As Joyce Nelson has recently pointed out, "this is not internationalism this is colonization" (*Borderlines*, #13).

So Kroker and Dorland's expression "the absolute domination of parasitism plus" is a direct, and yes "disillusioned," response (not "equivalent") to McLuhan's "Global Village" and its short-sightedness in the face of the political economy of culture.

## vi. In Conclusion

Classical Hollywood cinema has by no means been accounted for and I am certain there is much critical work to be done in this regard. I cannot contest the fact that it is part of the movement of our culture. But it is *the movement of our culture* which is blocked in the recesses of this Great Tradition.

In the cinema there are many traditions attributed to specific genres, authors, countries, social movements, political contexts, etc.; some traditions are longer than others and therefore seem to carry more academic weight, more critical notoriety. Consequently, sometimes 'smaller' traditions are excluded by a criticism which seeks to

invest itself with the phallic authority of a "Great Tradition." Blind to the assumptions that construct it, such a criticism cannot help but reinforce and perpetuate, precisely by exclusion, the privilege historically accorded to that *unicum* which is Man in his purest expression. The examples that Britton provides as 'instances' of classical Hollywood cinema share characteristics beyond those of their viability as high modernist works. *Psycho*, *Written on the Wind*, *While the City Sleeps*, *Blonde Venus*, *Bonjour Tristesse*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and *Gaslight* — all happen to have been made by white, European and male directors, with the sole exception of *Gaslight* by George Cukor — white, American and male. The question is, as Lippe and Wood point out, a "matter of emphasis."

The emphasis in Canada has never been Canadian cinema. Whether these are locally produced videos, experimental, feminist documentaries, or mainstream films, ours is a tradition which "few have heard of, fewer have seen, and most have little chance of seeing." In Canada there is no "great either/or," there has been only indifference based on ignorance.

If, as Michael Dorland has argued, *ressentiment* is an explicitly Canadian theme, then my article is in keeping with *this* tradition: the tradition of experiencing exclusion. It is time to take into account, to write and to provide a critical/theoretical framework for more localized practices, for smaller traditions or for practices which have no tradition at all. This task would not only entail writing about films "that few have heard of" but also addressing the very real economic and ideological realities that dictate these circumstances. This means directly challenging distribution networks, broadcast policies and exhibition venues that in Canada have made it impossible to see even our 'commercial' films.

Such an undertaking and all its attendant contradictions does not con-

stitute a move away from tradition but a return to the social and political function of criticism. The role of the critic today must be to create an oppositional public sphere or what Alexander Kluge has called a "factory of politics." What must be written is what has so often been excluded by capitalist culture and its critical apparatuses; what must be brought to light is the expression of difference — and through its very possibility: the incitement for *collective change*.

Only then can a magazine like *CineAction!* truly embody the promise that its title suggests. □

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# SYMMETRY, CLOSURE, DISRUPTION

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## The ambiguity of Blackmail

by Robln Wood

*Note: the main body of the following article constitutes a chapter of my new book, Hitchcock's Films Revisited, to be published by Columbia University Press in the fall of 1989. The introduction has been added for this issue of CineAction!.*

### Introduction.

... I know poetry is not dead, nor genius lost; nor has Mammon gained power over either, to bind or slay; they will both assert their existence, their presence, their liberty and strength again one day. Powerful angels, safe in heaven! they smile when sordid souls triumph, and feeble ones weep over their destruction. Poetry destroyed. Genius banished? No! Mediocrity, no: do not let envy prompt you to the thought. No; they not only live, but reign and redeem: and without their divine influence spread everywhere, you would be in hell — the hell of your own meanness.

Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*

One must speak for life and growth, amid this mass of destruction and disintegration.

—D.H. Lawrence

**T**he beginning and end of interpretation is evaluation. One starts, necessarily, from a 'personal response' — an embryonic value-judgement, tentative and provisional (except, as will be the case in the majority of instances, when the film is obviously very bad, a mere inert 'cultural document' indistinguishable in its essentials from thousands of others, hence worth intensive scrutiny only on the principle whereby one might decide whom to telephone by

blindfolding oneself and sticking a pin in the directory). The purpose of interpretation is to define and refine that response, subjecting it as well as the film that provoked it to scrutiny, leading to its confirmation, modification or, in some cases, rejection and reversal. What one has arrived at is a more responsible and solidly based value-judgement, though still necessarily provisional, subject to the 'Yes, but ...' of other viewpoints.

I must be careful with this term 'personal response.' My use of it in my second sentence has doubtless already deterred many from reading further: wasn't the notion that criticism starts from a 'personal response' definitively discredited long ago, at the very onset of the semiotics movement with its claims to the 'scientific'? In employing the term, am I not either displaying my culpable ignorance of everything that has happened in aesthetic theory over the past two decades, or attempting to resurrect a concept grounded in 'bourgeois individualism' and its commitment to an illusory 'unified subject,' a concept so antiquated that it can now appear not even controversial but merely quaint? I shall counter these questions with another: How did Stephen Heath, setting out to produce the most exhaustive (and exhausting) analysis of a film hitherto undertaken, decide upon *Touch of Evil* as his chosen object? Not, I suspect, by sticking a pin in a catalogue of Hollywood films. True, his project (the crucial step in the realization of which is the reduction of Orson Welles to "an effect of the text . . . a textual effect") is finally to reduce that extraordinary film to a kind of typicality (like any well-behaved little Hollywood movie, it eliminates the elements of disorder and restores its heroine to her rightful place as the male protagonist's 'good object'). Yet *Touch of Evil* is not *Hopalong Cassidy Meets the Bad Guys*, and the fascination it



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Alice (Anny Ondra) after the manslaughter.

exerts upon Heath is evident throughout the 80-odd pages of the analysis — a fascination in which, one cannot help speculating, the presence of that mere 'textual effect' must have played a decisive part. To presume that Heath started from a 'personal response' is not to presume too much.

The semioticians' (personal, in the sense which I shall define) response to the notion of personal response is based on a whole complex of fallacies and is totally dependent (as is the case with so much that they rejected) on the reduction of the concept to simplistic parody. It takes the form of assuming that (a) a personal response is regarded as emanating from some kind of mysterious essence of the individual, innate, uncontaminated and unmediated, and (b) it is purely emotional. It is possible that the term was used, carelessly, by some people in ways that would give such an interpretation a deceptive semblance of credibility; it is not what I mean by it, and I wish explicitly and entirely to repudiate it. To counter it, I offer ultimately the article on *Blackmail* that follows — certainly, like Heath's article on *Touch of Evil*, the outcome of a personal response; but I shall preface it by clarifying some of the issues at stake.

First, the personal response from which one begins is never sacrosanct — a fact that I can illustrate with some embarrassment from my own experience. The last time I was invited by *Sight and Sound* to contribute to their 'International Critics' Poll' my list of the 'Ten Best Films Ever Made' (admittedly a more than dubious enterprise, yet a chance to state one's commitments in microcosm), the list (most of which, for what such things are worth, I still stand by) included *Vertigo*, *Rio Bravo*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *La Règle du Jeu*, *Tokyo Story*, *Celine and Julie Go Boating*, and *Heaven's Gate*. I can approximately reconstruct my initial reactions to these films the first time I saw them: *Vertigo*: a disaster — how could Hitchcock be so stupid as to give away the solution two-thirds of the way through?; *Rio Bravo*: just another western — how could anyone take it seriously? *Letter*: sentimental sob-stuff; *La Règle*: so trivial — all those shallow people running around screaming at each other; *Tokyo Story*: 'the most boring film I have ever sat through' (yes, I actually remember saying this to the late Paddy Whannel, who patiently convinced me that I should go back and try again); *Celine and Julie*: incomprehensible and boring; *Heaven's Gate*: patently incompetent. This does not, however, encompass, account for or invalidate the notion of personal response: in some of the above cases I was encouraged to persevere by other people, but in every case I was haunted by a sense of 'more there,' things unaccounted for, a sense, really, of my own limitations and inadequacies. It is likely, in fact, that the greatest works of art will often *not* be immediately accessible: they make too great demands, and one of the things they demand is an adjustment within oneself, a modification or extension of one's sensibility, an imaginative leap, a progress in one's education. The experience is very different from the commoner satisfaction of being told what you already know, or what you want to know.

A personal response does not emanate spontaneously from some uncontaminated and innate individual essence; it comes from a social being who, from birth, has been conditioned and constructed not merely by the dominant norms of her/his cultural situation but by the tensions and conflicts those norms seek to repress or neutralize. Far from being sacrosanct, it is likely to be riddled with uncertainties, problems, internal contradictions. Neither is a personal response merely emotional, though the emotions will clearly play their part: it arises from the complex interplay of emotion and intellect,

which will frequently, for many of us, be in conflict. We all know that the intellect is much easier to educate than the emotions (how often in our lives have we found ourselves acting and reacting in ways that we know rationally to be foolish or harmful?). As the lights went up during the end credits at a recent public screening of *Cocktail*, my lover (who is much tougher about these things than I) made caustic comments on the fact that I had tears running down my cheeks. On a certain level his irony was perfectly justified. I despise *Cocktail*, and I despised it while I was watching it. I was perfectly aware, as the tears flowed, of the conditioned reflexes that had triggered them. But what a long history of conditioning was behind them! Consider what rewards the film offers: the young man who has gone astray learning to become a good citizen (learning what our culture generally calls 'responsibility,' i.e. the work ethic and the role of the father); the discovery that 'success' (in terms of career, status, finance) isn't everything, that wealth corrupts, that the 'middle road' is the best road; the construction of the heterosexual couple in all its ideological plenitude (and the traditional gender positions that go with it); the promise of imminent paternity (and, to crown it all, twins): the film provides us with a particularly complete version of the 'happy ending' ratified by our culture, both within and outside movies. Yet the side of me that despised the film — the side that was fully aware of its manipulateness, its banality, its utterly reactionary treatment of gender roles, its hypocrisy about 'success' — is just as personal as the side that succumbed, yet again, to the pull of my infant conditioning. Nor should the internal conflict I have described be reduced too simply to one between intellect and emotion: there are different levels — different layerings — of emotion, and my angry repudiation of the film was certainly coloured by an *emotional* commitment. There are levels of personal response that one has simply to learn to repudiate: emotions are no more sacrosanct than ideas.

"A value-judgement is personal or it is nothing": what Leavis is saying here cannot possibly be reduced (once one knows the context, the context being his entire work) to an endorsement of mere subjectivity (in the commoner sense of that word). Its force might become plainer if one substituted 'A political commitment is personal or it is nothing': we have to *mean* it, it must have behind it the strength and force of sincere conviction, a conviction that can arise only from the self (however disunified the self may be), rather than from, say, a desire to be fashionable, or 'correct,' or deliberately perverse or eccentric. A judgement will be affected not only by one's upbringing; by everything that has contributed to one's emotional and intellectual development; by one's commitments and beliefs. It will of course be biased, and the bias should never be concealed (an aesthetic position is not separable from a political position). Interpretation is both the means to arriving at a judgement and the means by which a judgement is given validity, not as absolute truth, but as the expression of a belief that is at once personal and more than personal.

Today, in the Postmodernist era, nothing is any longer of value. You and I, dear reader, are really no more than collections of signifiers, like all the great works of art we have ever admired. There is probably nothing we can do about this, as we (and all our aspirations) have been definitively deconstructed. I suppose this might enable us to confront the possibility of nuclear holocaust with a certain equanimity. As for me, I am still back in the discredited past, with Charlotte Bronte and D.H. Lawrence (among others). I believe in 'life,' in its full Leavisian sense, and in the ability of great artists to

'lead my sympathetic consciousness into new places, and away in recoil from things gone dead' (after all, they have done so so often in the past), even though I have been informed that the very concept of 'great artist' has been declared obsolete.

**T**HE EXTENSIVE AND INTENSIVE INVESTIGATION into the operations and function of classical realist narrative over the past two decades has stressed two basic premises:

1. The function of classical narrative has been, overall, to reinforce and appear to validate the patriarchal order and its subordination of women.
2. The fundamental principles that govern the structuring of classical narrative include symmetry (especially of the beginning and end — 'the end answers the beginning') and closure (the resolution of all the narrative threads and moral issues, the restoration of order, the reaffirmation of a set of values, embodied in a system of rewards and punishments of which marriage and death are, respectively, the privileged instances).

One need not argue with this, provided it is understood as the kind of crude generalization that can offer a useful starting point for critical enquiry into particular works — and provided the enquiry is prepared to find exceptions to the rules as well as examples that prove them. Where the line of argument becomes very dubious is in its tendency to collapse the two premises together, so that symmetry and closure are seen as indissolubly tied to the reaffirmation of patriarchy. There are strong reasons why this might be expected to be the case within our classical cinema (itself a patriarchal capitalist institution with its stake in preserving the status quo) but no convincing ones why it should be held to apply absolutely. Consider a simple imaginary scenario: at the beginning of the film a housewife arrives home from the daily shopping; during the ensuing 90 minutes of screen time she comes to learn that she is oppressed, subordinated, trapped in her domestic role; at the end of the film she packs her suitcases and leaves. There you have a very precise example of symmetry (arriving home/leaving home, opening the door/closing the door, carrying shopping-bags/carrying suitcases) and a permissible type of closure (the end of a marriage which also marks 'a new beginning'). One need not be surprised that such a scenario has not formed the basis for a great many classical Hollywood films (the two versions of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* were both produced outside the mainstream), but its possibility surely challenges any notion of a necessary and indissoluble connection between symmetry/closure and the restoration of patriarchy. Or imagine a more extreme instance, a sequel to the above. The film starts where the original ended, with the woman walking out of the house with her suitcases. In the course of the action she develops a sense of solidarity with other working women, joins a revolutionary Marxist/feminist organization, sells everything from her past to make an entirely new start. The film ends with her entering a lesbian commune. Here we have a scenario that is unthinkable within the terms of classical Hollywood but perfectly thinkable within the rules of classical narrative. I might add that the middle section (and main body) of the Mulvey/Wollen *Riddles of the Sphinx*, "Louise's Story Told in Thirteen Shots" (to which my second scenario bears certain resemblances), is a classical narrative filmed in an avant-garde manner, its action situated entirely within the bounds of 'realist' plausibility.

The function of symmetry and closure can in fact be theorized quite differently. One may even question whether 'closure' is not a misleading term: the sense of closure in my two imaginary examples is dependent entirely upon the 'classical' symmetry ('the end answers the beginning'). For the character, the ending in each case marks simply a crucial decision she has made which points forward to new problems, new developments, new struggles. If the function of the symmetry is to 'close,' this operates on a purely formal level and is contradicted on other levels. What the symmetry marks most obviously and strongly is neither finality nor the restoration of an earlier order, but *difference*. For the spectator this opens up rather than closes the narrative, inviting us to reflect back on how far the character has travelled and to speculate ahead on what may be in store for her. Many actual classical narratives can be argued to work this way. Many more, in which the closure (*enclosure* might be better) appears complete, are characterized by an irony or dissonance that makes possible for the spectator a critical distance: if the characters are seen to be definitively trapped, the spectator is set free to become aware of the entrapment and of the social conditions that produce it (*Blonde Venus* and *The Reckless Moment* are exceptionally fine examples).

*Blackmail* provides an admirable opportunity for the exploration of these issues. One of the most obsessively symmetrical classical narrative films ever produced, it is also profoundly ambiguous (conservative, radical) in its overall significance, the ambiguity — the possibility offered of diametrically opposed readings — being central to the entire Hitchcockian *oeuvre*, British or American. The film is of course celebrated in the history books as Hitchcock's first (and the first British) sound film: it is unnecessary here to recapitulate the eulogies (thoroughly deserved) of Hitchcock's inventiveness within the new medium. (At the same time, a comparison of the two versions — the sound version and the silent version it superseded — is beyond my scope, the silent version being inaccessible. Readers are directed to Charles Barr's fascinating article in *Sight and Sound* which strongly suggests that Hitchcock's mature POV shooting/editing style was more fully developed in the silent version and was actually retarded by the arrival of sound). What concerns me here is *Blackmail's* privileged status as the first of Hitchcock's 'guilty woman' films, a narrative pattern not taken up again until the move to Hollywood, where it becomes so central to his work. The pattern — and its characterizing ambiguities — is established in *Blackmail* with extraordinary completeness, Annie Ondra's performance at moments strikingly anticipating those much later ones of Grace Kelly and Tippi Hedren.

I shall concentrate on what is usually (but erroneously, the error testifying to the sexism of our culture) referred to as the 'murder' scene, but I want first to place it within an overview of the film's wider, all-embracing symmetry. One can analyse the use of symmetry at all levels (and this is applicable to classical cinema generally, *Blackmail* being simply an extreme example): symmetry of overall construction, symmetry within the larger segment (by which I mean a *series* of sequences linked together by continuity of action), symmetry within the individual sequence, symmetry within the construction of the individual shot, symmetry of composition within the individual frame. Since my interest here is in narrative structure this last will not concern me greatly: it is basically determined by the principle (practically ubiquitous in classical cinema) of centring, whereby the character(s) or object(s) on which our attention is to be focussed is/are placed in the middle of the image with roughly equal space

on either side. It is a principle that can of course be used dramatically (either by emphasis or negation), and *Blackmail* provides plenty of examples, of which I note two: 1. The use of the screen in Crewe's apartment during the 'murder' scene to separate Crewe (at the piano) from Alice (changing her clothes), symbolizing the barrier that Crewe will try to breach. 2. The strongly symmetrical triangular compositions during the scene between Alice, Frank and the blackmailer in the back room behind the White's store, in which Alice (seated, compelled to silence by her lover) is placed centrally in the foreground of the image while the two men struggle for domination (of her, of each other) behind the sofa.

The principle of construction that dominates the smallest unit, the frame, also dominates the largest, the film as a whole. The encompassing symmetry of *Blackmail* is particularly strongly marked by the repeated close-up of the revolving wheel of the speeding police car, which introduces a whole series of repetitions: the quasi-documentary shots describing the mechanics of a police chase. Hitchcock's account of the ending he originally planned suggests that the symmetry was to have been even more rigorous:

After the chase and the death of the blackmailer the girl would have been arrested and the young man would have had to do the same things to her that we saw at the beginning: handcuffs, booking at the police station, and so on. Then he would meet his older partner in the men's room and the other man, unaware of what had taken place, would say, 'Are you going out with your girl tonight?' And he would have answered, 'No, I'm going straight home.'

(Truffaut, pp. 63-4)

As the film stands, the parallel between beginning and end is still strong: (a) the pursuit and arrest (actual or attempted) of a male criminal; (b) a scene at the police station involving Alice's visit and culminating in a three-way conversation and shared laughter between Alice, Frank and the constable on duty. I shall examine in detail the effects produced by this complex symmetry — the significance that arises from the play of sameness and difference.

1. *The Pursuits*. I suppose one might describe Hitchcock's presentation of the police as 'ambiguous.' The criminals they pursue are not presented positively, and Frank is, after all, in terms of the conventions of classical narrative (i.e. the story, as distinct from the way in which Hitchcock tells it), the film's hero. It is a question, perhaps, of which is more powerful, the conventions or Hitchcock's use of them, a use that produces Frank as the most unsympathetic character in the film. One must assume that the narrative conventions (essentially, the mapping of 'good' and 'evil' in terms of the dominant social norms) were strong enough to preserve an appearance of respectability and the endorsement of the law, and they are supported by the most superficial of the film's signifiers (handsome detective, ugly criminal). What is remarkable is the thoroughness with which they and their very strong class bias are simultaneously undermined, in a film produced primarily (though not exclusively) for the bourgeois audience. Before Frank has been established as an individualized character, the activities and nature of the police have already been described with a harsh hostility that undercuts the ostensible 'documentary objectivity' of the whole opening sequence. They are characterized from the outset in terms of aggression, domination, intrusion, penetration: the forward-moving POV shots from inside the police van, the breaching of the archway that marks off the private world of the working-class, the forced entry through the

front door, the penetration of the bedroom. The 'private world' through the arch is coloured for us by a whole cluster of signifiers that carry positive connotations: children playing (albeit somewhat violently, but their spontaneous violence is set against the willed and impassive violence of the police); washing hanging on lines, a window being cleaned (in contradiction of bourgeois myths of working-class squalor); a white horse, that archetypal emblem of purity and nobility.

The sequence in the criminal's bedroom is marked most powerfully by his first awareness of the intrusion of the police detectives (it is also the first time we are allowed to see their faces clearly, so it is *our* introduction to them as well — one of them is Frank): the shot of their faces immobile, stonily expressionless, 'the Law' at its most impersonal and implacable, the dehumanization underlined by the fact that this is an image on a glass surface. The anticipation (by about 40 years!) of the opening shot of *Topaz* is very striking: the stony face of the surveillance officer caught (again within a complicated camera-movement) in the mirror at the entrance to the Soviet embassy. The negative attitude to institutionalized authority (no matter what its ideological sanction) encapsulated in those two moments runs right through Hitchcock's work, ranging from uneasiness through resentment to outright denunciation. The ambivalence already established (coldly impersonal authority, shifty-eyed criminal) crystallizes in the ensuing incident of the struggle for the gun by the man's bed: it activates one of the basic principles of Hitchcockian identification practice — his frequently reiterated assertion that we identify with the character who is being threatened, irrespective of moral norms — but it is very difficult to say who, here, *is* being threatened, the police (who may get shot) or the criminal (who may get arrested). Accordingly, embryonic point-of-view technique is used to dramatize *both* sides: the glances, directed toward the gun, of both the police and the criminal. The editing suggests, in fact, that the detectives see the gun and at first make no move for it, waiting for (perhaps willing) the criminal to grab it so that he will incriminate himself: our sense of threat is, if anything, weighted in favour of the criminal. The bedroom sequence culminates in the smashing of a window-pane: one of the outside bystanders has hurled a stone, as a gesture of protest and working-class solidarity. Do we identify with the discomfiture of the detectives, or with the sardonic laughter of the criminal?

Not all the film was re-shot for sound. The absence, throughout this entire opening segment, of a dialogue track was presumably motivated by a desire to tease the audience by withholding the promised 'miracle' of spoken dialogue: we see the characters' lips moving, but can only guess at what is being said. The strategy presupposes a kind of growing baffled frustration ('I thought this was supposed to be a *talking picture*') which will be relieved just in time to prevent the spectators from demanding their money back. However, the decision has an interesting side-effect: it represses any possible information we might have received as to the man's crime — its nature, motivation, the degree of certainty of his guilt. Dialogue is withheld, uncertainty maintained, right through to the moment of his incarceration: it is only after the door to the cells closes that we are at last allowed to hear the detectives' voices, as they walk away to go off duty. We watch the criminal being worn down by interrogation (its length suggested by the elliptical dissolve that shows an initially empty ashtray subsequently filled with cigarette butts), three authority figures (two of them standing over him) apparently browbeating him for a confession, but it is not clear that he confesses (if he did, then the ensuing

identification-parade would be superfluous). The only evidence of his guilt we are given is (a) his possession of a gun and (b) the recognition of one woman during the identification session. What is inescapably striking is the entire sequence's often point-for-point anticipation of the opening movement of *The Wrong Man*, and the connection (unless we take the criminal's guilt as a generic 'given') might make us reflect that the circumstantial evidence against the wrongly accused Henry Fonda is incomparably stronger, more detailed, more convincing. (Behind both sequences, of course, though their significance is scarcely reducible to it, lies Hitchcock's personal dread of incarceration as embodied in his familiar story — whether fact or fantasy — of his own arranged incarceration as a childhood punishment.)

With no information as to what crime the man has committed, and only the most minimal evidence that he is guilty of it, we are free to speculate — on the clear evidence the film *does* offer — that his *real* crime is to be working-class and perhaps socialist (he is introduced reading the *Daily Herald*, the newspaper associated with the British Labour Party). The police are presented from the outset as the defenders and preservers of a specifically bourgeois order — the order that produces, as its representative citizens, Frank, Crewe, the blackmailer Tracy, and Alice White, and the impossible contradictions that compromise the positions (moral, legal, ideological) of all four. At this point in the film (the moment of incarceration, the moment when the picture begins to talk) the class issue is dropped, to be replaced almost immediately by issues of sexuality and gender. But the opening of *Blackmail* must not be dismissed as irrelevant to what follows (its relevance, indeed, is guaranteed by the symmetry). The opening establishes the police as the representatives of a repressive bourgeois order, its agents of control, and what they control or contain here (very precariously) is but the first link in a chain traversing the entire film: the working-class — criminality — sexuality — art — women.

The function of the symmetry of the two pursuits is two-fold: to underline the parallel between the criminal of the opening and the blackmailer (together with their common positions as victims of the system which the police enforce and uphold); and to underline the contrast between the locations (working-class yard and room, the British Museum). On one level, the blackmailer appears as a 'resurrection' of the criminal within the narrative: he has a criminal record. On the level of class, his accent and manner suggest a fallen middle-class gentility rather than a proletarian background. Presented initially as mysterious, sinister and threatening, the character is rapidly demystified, revealed as a pathetic failure and victim rather than a hardened and malevolent criminal. The protracted scene of confrontation between Frank and Tracy, over a silenced Alice, in the living-room behind the White's store, crystallizes the theme of the film, a central Hitchcockian concern here receiving its most complete and complex statement in his work to date (and arguably in all his pre-Hollywood period): life in patriarchal capitalist society as an incessant struggle for domination. The entire Frank/Tracy battle of wills, with its shifting balance of power, might be seen as an elaborate extension of the struggle for the gun in the opening segment, the film evoking in the audience a similar ambivalence, a split or uncertain identification. It has become something of a critical commonplace that the 'blackmail' of the title is practised by Frank as much as by Tracy. That is, I think, inexact — Frank blackmails Tracy only in the loosest sense. What can be accurately asserted — and it is central to the film's presentation of authority — is that Frank's behaviour is, both legally and morally, far more

reprehensible than the blackmailer's. He withholds evidence (Alice's glove), and attempts to coerce a man into accepting the blame for a 'murder' Frank knows he didn't commit. If he blackmails him in the strict sense of the word, it is in forcing him to try to escape, the editing here strongly echoing that of the moment when the detectives *will* the criminal to grab for the gun: it is in Frank's interest that Tracy should incriminate himself by fleeing (the wish accompanied perhaps by a hope that he might get killed trying to escape?). Frank stands with his back against the door to the shop, through which we hear the noises of the police's arrival. He stares at Tracy, then looks significantly to his right (screen left) in the direction of the window. He then makes no move to stop Tracy until the police are at the door behind him; when he *does* dash to the window after Tracy, he awkwardly stands back to let another policeman go through first. By this time Tracy — because of his weakness, his vulnerability, his 'underdog' mentality — has drawn to himself a great degree of audience sympathy (divided here between him and Alice, with Frank the only character quite beyond it). Indeed, this triangular character-structure in *Blackmail* anticipates that of *Notorious* (Frank/Alice/Tracy parallel Devlin/Alicia/Sebastian) with the villain destroyed by the joint action (in Alice's case *inaction*) of hero and heroine, the sympathy attracted by the villain colouring our response to the 'happy ending.' The crucial difference is that Frank, unlike Devlin, remains totally unregenerate: where Devlin openly defies authority in order to identify himself with, and rescue, Alicia, Frank surreptitiously perverts police authority while remaining one of its representatives. It is possible to read Frank's motivation as not so much the desire to save Alice as to maintain and reinforce his personal authority over her. A recurrent — indeed pervasive — motif of the last third of the film is his refusal to allow her a voice, hence any personal autonomy. From this viewpoint, the version of the ending that Hitchcock originally projected — Alice's arrest — is, ironically, much closer to a 'happy ending' than the version we have: Alice would have been removed from Frank's oppressive domination and, imprisoned, would have been set free to speak at last for herself.

The oblique echoes of the opening sequence in the last scene in the Whites' living room anticipate the literal repetition of shots (revolving wheel, 'documentary' details of police procedure) that initiate the climactic chase, culminating in Tracy's death. The ambivalence of the opening (with whom do we identify, police or criminal?) is here developed and dramatized much more fully. Do we want Tracy to escape or do we (with Frank) wish him dead? Do we want Frank to 'save' Alice, knowing the kind of personal terrorism this implies as the future of their relationship? It is probably easier to answer the latter question negatively today (in retrospect from the feminist insights of the past 20 years) than it was in 1930, but it also seems unlikely that the affirmative answer could have been given without discomfort and disturbance, Alice being the spectator's primary identification-figure throughout most of the film. The ambivalence takes on tangible form in the cross-cutting between Alice and the chase, which expresses (or perhaps fails effectively to suppress) the ambiguity to which many instances of parallel montage are prone, the question of the precise relationship between the two terms. The dominant reading is clearly that Alice is experiencing guilt and contrition — which eventually crystallize in the letter she writes declaring her decision to confess. But the cross-cutting — close-ups of Alice, shots of the pursuit in the British Museum — can also be read as implying a closer relation between the two actions, one of

cause and effect: that Alice on some level *wills* Tracy's death as the convenient answer to her quandary (she writes the letter only *after* his fall). This possible but by no means obligatory secondary reading does not significantly detract from the sense that Alice, here, clearly represents the film's conscience — the conscience that Frank completely lacks.

The British Museum climax — the first of three Hitchcock climaxes to take place in/on a national monument — acquires some of its significance from its symmetrical relationship (here a relationship of opposites) to the working-class courtyard of the opening. It lacks the overt political reference to the Statue of Liberty (*Saboteur*) and Mount Rushmore (*North by Northwest*), but one might argue that the symmetry/opposition confers political connotations upon it: an oppressed and hostile proletariat 'answered' at the film's close by the grandeur of a national institution with strong imperialist overtones (the 'British' museum contains treasures hoarded from all over the world). The use of these monuments is consistent throughout Hitchcock's career, on either side of the Atlantic, corresponding to his attitude to authority in general. Just as there is a frequent conflict between narrative conventions and the Hitchcock tone, so here the cultural code and the authorial code collide, producing further ambivalence or discord within the text. The grandeur of the monuments is in each case qualified by their attributes of stoniness, heartlessness, implacability, derived from the dramatic situations and the *mise-en-scène*. The discord is perhaps most extreme in the case of *Saboteur*: the film's wartime patriotic rhetoric produces the Statue of Liberty as the ideal image of symbolic retribution, yet no one wants Fry to fall from it, and our anguish for him vastly outweighs any sense of satisfaction at the triumph of Democracy over Fascism — a democracy all confidence in which has been effectively undermined earlier in the film. I was quite correct, in the analysis of *North by Northwest* in *Hitchcock's Films*, to describe the Mount Rushmore presidential heads as the 'guardians of order'; what I failed to add (and at that time quite failed to grasp, privileging cultural over authorial code) is that it is an order the overall narrative context of the film discredits. As Andrew Britton has argued, the stone heads (guardians of the patriarchal order represented within the fiction by the callous, unscrupulous and opportunistic Professor) 'impede' the escape of Thornhill and Eve: they are not the solution to the hero's problems but the final obstacle he must overcome.

The most memorable image of the British Museum sequence is also that of a statue: the colossal head of an Egyptian god, 'its gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,' which dwarfs the figure of Tracy as he slithers down a rope beside it in his desperate flight from the police. Its cold impassivity remotely echoes the mirror reflection of the police detectives in the opening segment; it is also, in the film's system of images, the opposite of Crewe's painting of the laughing jester, the symbol of heartless authority against the figure that ridicules *all* authority, the latter the most vital and animated 'character' in the film just as the statue is its most stonily expressionless. Its implacable indifference to human pain and terror marks a kind of preface to Tracy's death, when he falls through the museum's glass dome as the police, Frank in the lead, trap him on the roof. Frank here occupies a position (characteristic of the film's ambivalence) midway between the hero of *Saboteur* (who actively tries to save Fry) and the villain Leonard of *North by Northwest* (who actively tries to kill Eve and Thornhill by pressing his foot on the latter's hand): Frank neither deliberately precipitates Tracy's fall nor makes any attempt to prevent it.

An examination of the film's other element of embracing symmetry — Alice's two incursions into Scotland Yard — must be delayed pending the analysis of the film's major central segment, to which I now pass.

**I** HAVE ALREADY SUGGESTED THAT THE FACT that this segment (which occupies almost a third of the film's running time) is habitually referred to as the 'murder' scene testifies to the pervasive sexism of our culture. Alice does not murder Crewe. He is attempting to rape her, and she defends herself with the only weapon to hand. It might be claimed that she overdoes it (the struggle behind the bed curtains suggests that she stabs him a number of times), but she is clearly overwhelmed by terror and panic; the most of which she could possibly be found guilty is manslaughter. Underlying the label 'murder scene' is the common masculinist myth that women *want* to be raped. If it is true that Alice's behaviour has provoked Crewe's assault, it is equally clear that, far from welcoming it, she is appalled by it. On a conscious level, what she wants is the fun and excitement of a 'daring' flirtation, with some but not too much danger. One might reasonably argue that her behaviour suggests that, on an unconscious level, she would like a sexual experience (*not* rape) but is also frightened of it. The film is deeply embedded in the middle-class British culture of its day, and the modern viewer ('modern,' as Peter Ustinov remarks in the American release version of *Le Plaisir*, is what we all like to call ourselves while we are alive) may need some imagination to bridge a certain gulf (which is not to suggest that our own world has severed itself cleanly).

*Blackmail* was made a year before I was born and is set in a milieu thoroughly and depressingly familiar to me. My parents were antique dealers, hence a few rungs higher in the social scale than tobacconists, to whom they would have condescended, but in terms of sexual mores the differences would be minimal. In the environment in which I grew up all bodily functions were regarded as shameful. I was made to feel deeply ashamed of peeing and shitting, and these simple natural functions had to be referred to (if at all, in cases of direst necessity) in whispers, using absurd euphemisms (I first heard the words 'piss' and 'shit' when I was in my teens). I never heard the word 'sex' spoken within my family, either by my parents or by any of my four older brothers and sisters: I developed a vague sense that it was an obscenity, a 'dirty word' that must not be uttered and that presumably referred to something even dirtier. When I was about 11, a friend of my sister had an illegitimate child. I am not sure how I deduced this, as it was alluded to only in muffled and obscure hints even when I was supposed *not* to be listening. Certainly I was not supposed to know about it, and was actually afraid I might inadvertently reveal my knowledge to my family, who would have been shocked and angry. (In retrospect, it seems to me that the typical British middle-class upbringing was dedicated mainly, both at school and in the home, to the task of stifling the child's natural desire to learn. Much of what we continue to call 'education' today appears to have the same ambition, though the taboos now are more likely to be political than sexual). My sister, a woman in her early thirties, never, as far as I know, met or spoke to her 'friend' again. As for myself, I knew by that time (without ever being told) that babies somehow grew in women's bodies; I had absolutely no idea how they got there, so had only the vaguest notion of why my sister's friend's misfortune was so unspeakable.

My case may have been extreme (though I have every

reason to believe the contrary). But one can safely assume that the essentials of the kind of cultural/sexual situation I have described (which 'modern' people today may find so alien in its details but so disturbingly familiar in its underlying principles) were taken for granted by the audiences for whom *Blackmail* was made, and by the people who made it. (Donald Spoto's account of Hitchcock's childhood in *The Dark Side of Genius* is useful here.) Alice is certainly a virgin: Frank would never dream of suggesting premarital intercourse, and if he did she would repudiate the suggestion with horror. The entire manslaughter sequence can only be understood if, at the very least, we have in mind that a family like the Whites would have regarded the use of contraceptives (if they had ever heard of such a thing) as an unspeakable abomination, and abortion as unthinkable. Alice is caught in a particular cultural moment: a moment when everything in popular fashion encourages permissiveness, 'naughtiness,' rebellion (epitomized in the song Crewe sings for her at the piano) and everything in one's home and educational environment repudiates such licence. She is also caught between two men, who are much more than two individual characters. They represent two divergent, antagonistic, yet curiously complementary masculinist attitudes to women and sexuality, and the film treats them both with uncompromising harshness: Frank, who wishes to dominate, enclose and contain Alice within the horror of bourgeois respectability; Crewe, the 'nippy cock-' of the half-seen menu in the restaurant, who wants to use her for his casual gratification. Both indeed want to *use* her, whether for sex or for the bolstering of the male ego: for ends that are in effect socially sanctioned (officially or unofficially) within a masculinist culture. The sexuality that Alice consistently expresses has no worthy responder: Frank wants to control and contain it, Crewe to exploit it. What the film — like so much of Hitchcock's work — reveals is not the personal wrongness of this or that individual so much as the wrongness of an entire social/sexual/ideological system.

Bearing all this in mind, it becomes clear that Alice's

behaviour throughout the manslaughter segment (throughout the film) is very precisely described, with all of Hitchcock's characteristic empathy for the feelings and responses of women trapped in the impossible situations the patriarchal system creates. The irony of the neon gin advertisement ('White Purity') that Alice sees in her wanderings after the 'crime' is complex. On one level she has killed to defend her 'purity'; on another, that purity is at once a mere technicality and a factor of desperate importance. She goes off with Crewe as an act of rebellion against Frank's masculinist domination and his unquestioning assumption of its rightness. Her behaviour in Crewe's apartment continuously suggests a desire for erotic pleasure (the 'purity' is an illusion, an imposition), but a desire she cannot even *think* might be voluntarily fulfilled: the absence of means of birth control, the terror of pregnancy, the stigma of illegitimacy, are but the surface manifestations of a wider terror of sexuality itself instilled by the culture and particularly emphasized in relation to the female, whose 'purity' must at all costs be preserved for monogamous marriage. Crewe, precisely because all he is after is a moment of pleasure (the 'poor benefit of a bewildering minute'), could respond to this only by renunciation or rape. The blame for what happens is neither his nor Alice's so much as the system's: the film makes it clear that Crewe's 'dishonorable' intentions are really no more oppressive than Frank's 'honorable' ones.

It is against this background that I want to examine the manslaughter segment — and particularly its symmetry — in detail. It is necessary to begin with a complete shot breakdown. The segment, though continuous in action, divides into five sequences according to location (see chart below).

It will be apparent at once that the entire segment is symmetrically constructed, the five sequences forming an ABCBA in which A is the exterior of the house, B the interior (hall, staircase), C the interior of Crewe's apartment. The symmetry is underlined by the fact that, according to Metz's categories, the sequences given above as A, C and E are 'scenes' (i.e., sequences with no lapses of temporal continuity) while B

#### **Blackmail: the manslaughter sequence: shot breakdown.**

##### *Key to abbreviations:*

LS: long shot; CU: close-up; LA: low angle; POV: point-of-view; HA: high angle; MS: medium-shot

#### **A. Exterior**

1. LS. static. No dialogue. Blackmailer, then Crewe and Alice.
2. Medium 2-shot, Crewe and Alice.
3. Insert: Mr. White's shop.
4. As 2.
5. Insert: the blackmailer.
6. As 2 and 4: Motor-horn.
7. As 5.
8. Up steps to door. Voice off. Motor-horn. Crewe exits from and subsequently re-enters frame.

#### **B. Interior of house**

1. Hall. Crewe and Alice. Pan left.
2. LA. POV. The stairs.
3. As 1. The note.
4. Split screen effect: Alice to stairs R, Crewe along hall L.
5. Crewe and landlady. 2-shot.
6. Crewe to stairs.
7. Crane-shot up stairs. Crewe and Alice in LS.
8. To Crewe's door.

#### **C. Inside Crewe's apartment**

1. Inside door. Crewe and Alice enter (Medium 2-shot). Light switched on. The mask.
2. Room. POV
3. As 1. Crewe to light fire.

4. Crewe draws curtain over bed.
5. LS. They move about the room.
6. MS. Alice. Looks L.
7. LS. HA. POV. Policeman along street, R-L
8. As 6. Alice looks ahead.
9. The pointing jester. LA. Rapid track out. POV with licence.
10. As 6 and 8, but more LS. Alice points and laughs. Pan R with her. Whistling begins.
11. MS. Alice. Piano L, dress in b.g., empty canvas R. Alice picks up easel.
12. LS. Crewe startled, wipes hands with handkerchief.
13. Alice's drawing. Long take (2 minutes, 22 seconds).
14. Alice and the dress. Closer MS.

and D are 'ordinary sequences' (containing time ellipses), though in practice Metz's distinction seems often merely academic. In accordance with the usual practice of classical cinema, the symmetry is never perfect, countered here by the common principle of condensation: the first interior sequence (B) consists of eight shots, the balancing sequence (D) of only four; sequence (A) (outside the house), with nine shots, is answered by E, containing only two. The primary function of symmetry that I began by describing — the emphasizing of difference — is established here with exemplary clarity. Consider two pairs of 'answering' shots: 1. The first (A1) and last (E2) of the entire segment. The camera position is identical, both shots being static long-shots of the house front; both are marked by the intrusion of the blackmailer. In A1 he is a small, insignificant figure, unidentified, who could be taken for an irrelevant passer-by were it not for his suspiciously furtive movement; in E2 he is present as a large, ominous shadow that looms up over the front door as Alice hurries out of frame into the darkness. 2. The only two obtrusively 'striking' shots of the entire segment — striking, that is, in terms of a cinematographic virtuosity that attracts attention to itself: the elaborate upward crane-shot that accompanies Crewe's and Alice's progress up the stairs (B7 — it is obtrusive also in its revelation that the studio set lacks a wall), 'answered' by the overhead shot of the stairwell (D2) that passively and distantly records Alice's solitary descent. The differences the symmetry marks are in both cases determined by the events that intervene.

One may note here, parenthetically, the one instance in the whole segment of a major disruption of symmetry: the appearance of the landlady in sequence B, which has no equivalent in sequence D. But this is not so much the exception to a rule as the demonstration of another of its principles: that the patterns of symmetry within a classical movie continually overlap, forming a complex network. The landlady's appearance here is a component of another formation within the overall structure that is an instance of virtually perfect symmetry. She appears three times. The middle occa-

sion is very strongly marked by the use of non-realistic cinematic devices: Alice's scream when she sees the extended arm of the derelict in the street becomes the landlady's scream when she finds Crewe's body (one of the familiar textbook examples of Hitchcock's inventive use of sound); and this is followed by use of split-screen to show her phone-call to the police. This occurs at almost exactly the film's mid-point, and her two other appearances are grouped almost equidistantly around it: the conversation with Crewe (approximately 20 minutes from the film's beginning), her interrogation in the police station (approximately 20 minutes from the end).

As preface to a detailed discussion of sequence C I want to demonstrate briefly another aspect of classical symmetry, the symmetrical construction of a sequence, and sequence A, in its relative simplicity and conciseness, offers a convenient instance. The sequence is framed by two shots that mark, respectively, the couple's entrance into and exit from the scene, and link them within a single take with the blackmailer, who appears in A1 as a hovering figure and in A9 as an offscreen voice. Between these two framing shots we have a simple alternating pattern, of which the basic element — the anchor of the sequence — is established in A2 (the two-shot of Crewe and Alice) and repeated in 4, 6 and 8. The three inserts that interrupt what could have been a single take, producing the sequence's alternating symmetry, are all marked by the fact that they are not located spatially in relation to the couple: Mr. White's shop is 'around the corner,' so the insert shot of it (A3) cannot be point-of-view, and we don't know where or how far 'the corner' is; Tracy is shown listening to the couple's conversation in close-up (A5, 7), but exactly where he is standing is never made clear (beyond the fact that he is somewhere offscreen left). The inserts epitomise — at the very moment when Alice and Crewe are negotiating the terms of her visit to his apartment/studio, when she is hesitating between two worlds, two sets of values — the two opposite potential threats: the parental authority (the shop prominently bears her father's name) which she is about to flout by entering a strange man's

15. Repeat of 12. Crewe with drinks.
16. Alice, Crewe, dress. Pan L when he goes to piano. Split screen effect: partition.
17. Crewe by window. Repeats composition of Alice in 6, 8, 10. Alice's movement at R.
18. Split screen effect. Alice changes. The song. Long take. (2 minutes, 22 seconds).
19. Doing up dress.
20. Straps lowered; seduction attempt.
21. Close shot: the kiss.
22. As 20. Crewe repulsed.
23. Alice behind screen.
24. MS. Crewe. Shadows over face. Steals Alice's dress.
25. Split screen effect. Piano. Dress thrown off screen L. Alice dragged by wrists.

26. The policeman. As 7, but movement L-R. Alice's cries.
27. The bed (curtain). Alice's hand. Track in on knife.
28. The curtain. Struggle. Crewe's hand. Then Alice with knife. Look into camera. Composition echoes 17, with curtain replacing screen.
29. Closer MS. Alice shivering. Pan L with her to window. Then she looks up and R.
30. The black dress over the picture.
31. Alice to picture.
32. CU picture. Dress pulled away. The jester.
33. CU Alice. Strikes at picture.
34. The torn picture. Alice turns and walks into camera. Dissolve to
35. LS. Alice in the room. Like 2 but no

longer POV. Static long take: dressing, coat, to door, light switched off, back for handbag, look L.

36. The name on picture blacked out.

37. As 35. Second light switched off. The empty room.

#### D. Interior of house.

1. Alice outside Crewe's door.
2. Overhead LS. Alice descends stairs. Dissolve to
3. Alice's feet. Camera moves back to LS. (hall).
4. Closer shot. Alice by door. Dissolve to

#### E. Exterior

1. Alice outside door.
2. LS. Alice walks off R out of frame, shadow of blackmailer enters frame.

apartment (and an artist to boot); the sinister potentialities of the uncertain world of dubious morals to which she is attracted. The inserts in fact complete a chain started by the last shot of the previous sequence which, through a dissolve, becomes the transition to the present one: a close-up of Frank against a dark background as he finds himself abandoned, very similar to the two inserts of Tracy. (The symmetry of a given sequence is seldom closed or perfect. The end of the segment provides another example: D3, the close-up of Alice's feet as she completes her descent of the stairs, introduces a new series that will be developed throughout the *next* segment, the 'episodic sequence' of Alice's walk through the nocturnal streets.) Frank, father, blackmailer: diverse faces of the male-constructed moral order by which Alice is oppressed, the blackmailer dependent upon precisely the patriarchal morality that Frank upholds and embodies.

### The Manslaughter Scene

Inevitably, given the duration and complexity of the action, the symmetry of the sequence is less precise and schematic than that of A, its patterning correspondingly more intricate. This intricacy — essentially a play with paired images, the pairing often overlapping so that a single motif operates within more than one pair — is however contained within a clearly marked symmetry of beginning and end such as we have seen functioning over the entire film, over the large segment, and within that segment's component sequences. And again the symmetry marks difference: here, the change wrought in Alice's life by the events the scene dramatizes, a change one might describe as the loss of innocence, or perhaps more accurately as the loss of her *belief* in her innocence. The scene opens with Alice's entry into the apartment with Crewe and ends with her exit from it, alone. Shot C2 is answered by C35 and 37. The camera position is similar, but C2 is offered as Alice's point-of-view, shared by the viewer, while C35 gives us Alice in the room, in long-shot, now looked at rather than looking, and C37 gives us the darkened room, now empty save for Crewe's body. (Precise analysis here is rendered problematic by the fact that Hitchcock plays havoc with spatial relations throughout the sequence. It is quite impossible to make sense of the layout of Crewe's apartment — where, for instance, is the bed supposed to be in relation to the other objects? What passes for a POV shot as Alice enters at the start of the sequence cannot possibly be taken from the doorway by which she leaves at the end, although she emerges on to the same staircase.) Further, the first and last shots of the sequence are marked by the switching on and off of a light, respectively. C4 (Crewe concealing the too-suggestive presence of the bed by drawing the curtains over it, revealing that his dishonorable intentions are already at least partly conscious) is answered by the sequence's dramatic climax (C27, 28), the struggle and stabbing behind the same curtains.

The sequence's pattern of pairings is organized within this symmetrical framework and around the turning-point, the close-up of the kiss (C21), almost the central shot of the sequence and the moment when Alice realizes that things are 'going too far' and begins to reverse her behaviour and actions. (The sequence is as intricately composed as a piece of serial music, and I am reminded here of the central orchestral episode in Berg's *Lulu* where the music *literally* goes into reverse after it reaches its midpoint.) I begin by examining three overlapping pairings: policeman/jester, jester/nude, the two dresses.

1. *Policeman/jester*. The two male figures (occupying

opposite poles of the film's authority/subversion system) are introduced in very close proximity (C7, C9) in shots from Alice's point-of-view, the high angle shot of the policeman answered by the low angle shot of the painted jester. Although the interval is longer, the pattern is repeated (same angles) in shot C26 (the policeman's direction reversed) and shot C32. By shot 26, however, the safety apparently represented earlier by the policeman (Alice looks reassured, C8) is no longer accessible: the shot is no longer POV, and the policeman doesn't hear her screams. And by shot 32 she is no longer able to laugh, even hesitantly, at the jester, instead tearing the canvas with her fingernails in an attempt to destroy the image she associates with her surrender to moral laxity, and which now seems to be ridiculing her in her terrifying predicament.

Initially, Alice feels reassured by the policeman and alarmed by the jester. The policeman stands in for Frank and the security the patriarchal order offers to helpless females. The jester transcends all the characters in the film, including the one who painted him: the object of his laughter is too non-specific, its significance cannot be reduced to a projection of Crewe's social attitude (the latter being firmly within the patriarchal ideology, although seemingly nonconformist). One might suggest that he is ridiculing, amongst other things, the private life of his creator, as is not uncommon with works of art (including many of Hitchcock's own). The traditional



Alice with Frank and Tracy.

court jester was licensed to ridicule authority; Alice here nervously misinterprets him as ridiculing simply the narrowly circumscribed morality she is tempted to flout. Hence her tentative identification with him: she points her finger, imitating his gesture, momentarily constructing herself as his mirror-image (C10); Crewe's whistling begins offscreen at this point, marking his growing confidence in being able to seduce her. Yet the jester is laughing here *at* Alice, not *with* her, just as in the later scene of the police investigation he will laugh at Frank. Finally, his silent laughter will dominate the film's conclusion as Alice's laughter dies, the 'restoration of order' coloured by a whole complex of dissonances. In the last resort he can be seen (given the repeated use of POV shots) as laughing at the audience, who are as much entangled in the web of ideological contradictions as the characters.

2. *The two pictures.* Crewe's painting of the jester, Alice's sketch of the female nude, are similarly integrated in the scene's 'serial' patterning of symmetry, opposition, repetition, inversion. The formal parallel in this case is very precise: the first POV shot of the jester (C9) is followed four shots later (C13) by Alice's execution of her drawing (Crewe guiding her hand); the second POV shot of the jester (C32) is followed four shots later (C36) by Alice's act of blacking out her name under the sketch. It might be argued that the sketch is Crewe's rather than Alice's: she has no artistic ability (as her outline of a face demonstrates), he skilfully completes the 'masterpiece' by guiding her in the construction of the nude she would never have dared to draw (her response is 'Ooh, you *are* awful!', at once shocked and complicit). Yet she promptly expresses her acceptance of the sketch as her own by signing her name under it. What is more, the 'signing' is deeply ambiguous: she prints her name in block capitals, so that it looks less like the artist's signature than like the picture's title. It is easy to interpret the incident as expressing an unconscious wish: Alice would like to be naked in Crewe's apartment.

3. *The dresses.* At the centre of the scene, organized around the pivotal kiss, is the complicated play with dresses: the dress Alice has worn for what was initially to be a 'respectable' evening out with Frank (who wanted to take her to a movie about Scotland Yard), the dress Crewe persuades her to put on by offering to paint her portrait. The connotations of the latter dress have been widely misperceived: it is surely not a dress from classical ballet, but the dress worn by women in the traditional British seaside 'pierrot' shows, hence evoking *risqué* songs and anecdotes, loose morals, promiscuity. It is the perfect complement to Crewe's song, a eulogy of the 'modern' (i.e. permissive, emancipated) young woman. Alice's willingness to put on the pierrot costume confirms, therefore, the implications of her name on the nude sketch; it also links her, by association, with the jester, whose costume also signifies 'licence,' albeit of a somewhat different order. The changes of dress are organized around the central kiss: Alice changes into the pierrot costume in C18; the kiss occurs three shots later, C21; Alice attempts to change back (Crewe steals her own dress) in C23-24. When Crewe flings aside Alice's respectable black dress, it falls over the image of the jester; when Alice finally retrieves it (C32), she can no longer identify with the jester's mockery, because she is now irrevocably a part of what is being mocked. The moment draws together two of the scene's major motifs: the jester, whom Alice now tries to destroy, ripping the canvas; the black dress, which she now resumes, attempting to reassert a persona, a social role, the reality of which the scene has effectively undermined.

The patternings of motifs in the scene can be summed up in a chart (though this cannot at all convey the complexity of effect):

ENTRY	C1
curtain	C4
policeman	C7
jester	C9
sketch	C13
dresses	C18
KISS	C21
dresses	C23-4
policeman	C26
curtain	C28
jester/dress	C32
sketch	C36
EXIT	C37

This analysis of the structuring of symmetry brings us finally to the question of identification. It seems that the editing of the silent version of *Blackmail* was at a number of points far more fragmented, far more congruent with the fully developed editing style of Hitchcock's maturity, with its characteristic use of point-of-view shots; the long takes, in particular (e.g. C13, C18), were forced on Hitchcock by the initial technical problems arising from the direct recording of dialogue. What this goes to prove, however, is that POV editing technique, though it may be used to reinforce identification, is not essential to its construction. Alice is our primary identification-figure throughout the scene. The audience at which the film was directed consisted far more of Alices and Franks than of Crewes: Crewe is the alien figure who has to be 'figured out' (by Alice, by the spectator). And, although she finally kills Crewe, it is Alice throughout who is perceived as threatened. This accounts for the fact that she remains our identification-figure even when we are shown things she is not aware of: Crewe surreptitiously drawing the bed curtains (C4), Crewe, just before the assault, suddenly endowed by shadows with the traditional mustachios of the villain of melodrama (C24). In both instances it is Alice that we care about, and, such brief moments apart, it is everywhere Alice's experiences that we share. One tiny, eccentric detail of editing exemplifies this: the dissolve that links C34 and 35. The most familiar 'textbook' use of the dissolve is to indicate a time lapse (and frequently a change of locale), but here there is none: shot 35 takes up precisely Alice's movement in the preceding shot, and there is no disruption of the temporal continuity that makes this extended scene a 'scene' in the strict Metzian sense. What the false indication of a time lapse achieves is to convey to us Alice's sense at that point of the dreamlike protraction of time. Paradoxical as it may be, this identification with Alice is not seriously undermined by the fact that, from the killing of Crewe on, Hitchcock uses a number of devices to distance us from her: the direct look into camera (C28), the walk into camera (C34), and in the next sequence the overhead stairwell shot (D2). The whole business of identification in the cinema is enormously complex (far more so than the author of *Hitchcock's Films* recognized), and I shall take up this issue in a later chapter. For present purposes it is sufficient to assert that, given the complexities of human perception and human sympathy, it is not impossible to identify with and be detached from a character simultaneously.

Above all, our identification with Alice is constructed by the patterning of symmetry and its marking of difference.



The morning after: Alice reacts to the breadknife.

From the pivotal kiss — the point where the action and some of the motifs go, as it were, into reverse — the major motifs (policeman, jester, sketch, dresses) are transformed, take on new meanings, and this transformation is centred securely in Alice's consciousness; the meaning even of what must logically be beyond her consciousness (the policeman passing outside, C26) is comprehensible only in relation to it. Identification with/detachment from: we share Alice's consciousness but are by no means restricted to it. It is the fact that we are not restricted to it that makes it possible to assert that, if the film offers its audience another identification-figure, one who knows more than Alice knows, it is the jester.

**A** POSSIBLE READING OF *BLACKMAIL* WOULD reveal it as deeply sexist and misogynist (a charge that has of course been levelled at numerous Hitchcock films: see, as among the more distinguished and intelligent examples, Michael Renov's reading of *Notorious*, which I discuss in Chapter 17). According to this reading, the opening establishes the 'man's world,' the world of crime and the law, as the serious and important one. This the woman disrupts, with her frivolousness, selfishness and triviality: Alice is annoyed because Frank has kept her waiting, then irresponsibly dumps him in favour of Crewe. Her subsequent behaviour provokes the death of two men, Crewe (who, while not blameless, is sexually aroused by her flirtatiousness) and Tracy, who dies for the crime she committed. She is also responsible (her ultimate guilt, perhaps) for compromising the integrity of Frank, the hitherto upright and irreproachable policeman, by placing him in a position where he feels compelled to betray his moral principles and civic duty by covering for her. Alice gets the suffering she deserves, and the satisfaction the film offers the spectator (always constructed, of course, as male, although women might be able to derive a certain masochistic pleasure from Alice's punishment) is that of seeing a silly, irresponsible young woman chastized for her weaknesses, so that at the end she is ready to accept her 'correct' place subordinated to Frank's authority as his wife.

What is to prevent one from extracting such a reading from *Blackmail*? Nothing: the film makes such a reading available. Nothing, that is, so long as we reduce the film to its narrative structure. Like all fully coherent readings (by which I mean readings that resist the awareness of complexity and contradiction), its elaboration would be dependent upon multiple suppressions and evasions. There is a higher coherence possible, the coherence that strives to hold in balance and tension the alternative readings the film makes available. I hope I can claim without immodesty that the analysis I have developed so far exposes the superficiality and inadequacy of a reading of the type I have just outlined. It is available in the film because its attitudes are inherent, even dominant, in the culture that produced it; its coherence is shattered by the film's detail, and by the structures it develops that transcend linear narrative.

It remains to examine the film's ending — the precise nature of its 'closure.' First, however, it is illuminating to glance briefly at Hitchcock's personal appearance, his most elaborate 'cameo' in all of his films, for the attitude to authority and rebellion that it encapsulates. Hitchcock appears as a passenger on the train on which Alice and Frank travel for their date; a small boy leans over from the seat behind him and repeatedly pushes off the pompous fat man's hat; Hitchcock responds with impotent exasperation. Even in this brief, limited instance we may raise the issue of identi-

cation: with whom do we, with whom does Hitchcock, identify here? Clearly with *both* characters. We have all been bothered, at some point in our lives, by obstreperous children, and we all know how aggravating it can be to have our sense of dignity challenged; at the same time, a part of us loves to ridicule Hitchcock — both in his character as the pompous commuter, and as that even more powerful and intimidating figure the Great Film Director. And Hitchcock delights in this (self-)ridicule too: that is the whole point and substance of the joke, and why it is so charming. We can confidently assert, in fact, that 'Hitchcock' is not only the fat commuter: he is also, in spirit, the small boy, the rebellious child. We should also note that this brief sequence-shot anticipates (by inversion) the closely ensuing incident where Frank (the film's major embodiment of authority) flouts the authority of the young boy attendant in the restaurant: even authority-figures resist the system on which their authority depends.

The primary function of the symmetry of Alice's two visits to Scotland Yard — to meet Frank for their date at the beginning, to confess to killing Crewe at the end — is clearly to dramatize her chastisement. What is in question is not the resolution of the narrative but the attitude to that resolution defined by both the immediate dramatic realization and the wider context of the film as a whole. Our continued identification with Alice — as, by this point, the film's conscience, a conscience that is denied a voice by the male authority-figures, the constable who won't take her seriously, the commissioner who doesn't want to listen, Frank who wants to silence her — is decisive here: it is precisely this identification that enables us to experience the film's dominant male figures as oppressive and invalidated. The most precise point of symmetry is the repeated motif of the joke: the joke (which we don't hear) whispered in Alice's ear by the police constable, at which she laughs; the same constable's final joke ('Well, did you tell them who did it?') at which she *tries* to laugh. The symmetry is compounded by the fact that, at moments in both scenes, the framing places Alice between the two men, a compositional device we have already noted in the symmetrical framings of the triangle in the Whites' living room, Frank/Alice/Tracy: the woman denied the voice between the two men who possess it. The joke at the beginning is presumably quite trivial; that at the end expresses a kind of amiable, unconscious contempt for women (what could Alice possibly know about something as serious as murder?). Alice's attempted laughter is frozen when she is confronted, once again, by the film's only authentic laughter: the jester, as Crewe's painting is carried past, appropriately now back-to-back with Alice's sketch. What do the jester's laughter and Alice's inability to return it now signify, at the film's final moment? Again, different readings are possible. Alice, chastened (rendered chaste), cannot face the laughter which she interpreted as ridicule of conventional morality, and which helped seduce her in her fall from 'innocence.' Alternatively, she sees the jester as laughing at her as she is now, finally trapped within the male order, subordinated to Frank by the role she has played in his own corruption. Once again, it could be argued that the former is the reading implied by the conventions of classical narrative, the latter by Hitchcock's intervention, the particularities and peculiarities of his 'inscription.' From a Hitchcockian viewpoint, the jester (the film's final image) is laughing at the entire social order, with its monstrously oppressive (dis-)organization of gender and sexuality and at the people (all the film's characters) who remain trapped within its contradictions. □

# “Just What The Hell is Rickman Trying to Say?”

## Some Remarks on Critical Method and Critical Controversy

by Susan Morrison

IN the last issue of *CineAction!* a letter by Gregg Rickman was printed which called to task an article that I had written, “Getting A Fix On The Sixties: Philip Kaufmann’s *The Wanderers* Revisited,” for the Teen Film issue of *CineAction!*, number 12. While my preference would have been to have had the opportunity to reply directly to its author’s comments, I was forced to postpone my response due to a tight publishing deadline. The disadvantage, of course, is that those readers who have not read the previous *CineAction!* will be unfamiliar with the letter, and thus with his comments to which I intend to refer. Rather than going through the repetitive task of reprinting the letter in full and answering each of Rickman’s objections point for point, given the

obvious constraints, I have instead chosen to deal for the most part with the intent of the letter rather than with its content.

Gregg Rickman’s ‘unbarbed’ response to my reading of Kaufman’s *The Wanderers* seeks to correct what he sees as a serious fault; that is, the possibility that my ‘overvaluing’ of this ‘decidedly minor’ film might activate its inclusion in the ‘canon’ of great films. As self-styled gatekeeper, Rickman holds *The Wanderers* up to his criteria for canonic inclusion, apparently a double-barrelled agenda of both *authorial* and *narrative* coherence, and finds it grossly wanting in both categories. Those films which he offers as substitutes, Lucas’s *American Graffiti* and Penn’s *Four Friends*, are set forth as exemplars of the above-mentioned qualities. In addition, he questions my initial decision to under-

take an analysis of a film which (he has deemed) is a failure as either a piece of social criticism or social history. While he has many individual questions concerning my reading of the film, it is most apparent that the real issue here is one of methodology, ‘his’ against ‘mine.’ Rickman’s letter is most welcome, therefore, as an opportunity for me, in making my response to it, to make my contribution to the theme of this issue of *CineAction!*: the function of cinematic criticism. Consequently, there will be two parts to the reply: the first will respond to what I see as his basic assumptions regarding the purpose of a critical practice; the second will briefly undertake a discussion of those objections to “Getting A Fix On The Sixties” which will not have been clarified by the first part.

It is easy enough to untangle the

underlying premise upon which Rickman's criticism is based. Above all else, he claims that a film must be *worthy* of critical attention, and by worthy he implies that it must be redeemable as a great work of art. His criteria for achieving greatness, as indicated above, consist of a close adherence to the classical unities of literary narrative, especially coherence within the text. A film such as *The Wanderers*, which does not conform to the standard Hollywood rules of filmic form and order, therefore, could never hope to attain a position in his canon. Similarly, under Rickman's guidelines, no non-narrative film, be it avant-garde, experimental or independent, could ever hope to find favour with him. (In fact, his comments on the letter to *CineAction!* about *Over The Edge* and *River's Edge* seem overly concerned with identifying Tim Hunter as the last of the great Hollywood classicists, a supposition that he offers as a starting point for a possible theme for a future issue on liberal humanism versus post-modernism.)

## CANONICAL CLAIMS

There is something eminently problematic about this type of approach to the analysis of a film, or indeed of any art form. It is strongly reminiscent, in a reduced way, of the 'classic' argument used by the art critic Clement Greenberg in *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939) to create and maintain a distinction between 'high art' and popular culture. In that article, Greenberg, soon to become the avatar of American High Modernism, laid the foundation for a kind of formalist criticism whose sole authority lay in the eye of what he called the 'Educated Beholder'; that is, in the last instance, himself; and whose sole task was to select, preserve and protect those works of art which he considered to be canonical, at the expense of all other artistic productions. While at this early point in his career, Greenberg professed socialist leanings, and in fact, ended the piece with a (curious) claim that it is the manifest duty of Socialism to preserve the masterpieces of high art from the philistine encroachment of the fascists, he presently eliminated all such political excesses from his writings, so that, by the post-war period he had become the chief spokesman for an art that he claimed was politically neutral. Later, in "Can Taste Be Objective?" (1973), Greenberg tackled an exceedingly complex aesthetic question by resorting to an historicising tactic to reaffirm his authority as standard bearer. Great

works of art, he claims, are proven to be great through their longevity as exemplars. Minor works (let alone bad ones) cannot stand the test of time and are thereby *naturally* eliminated from the canons.

What this 'Social Darwinist' approach fails to take into consideration is that aesthetic experience is not a natural category, but, as Charles Harrison, Michael Baldwin, and Mel Ramsden emphasize in their paper, "Art History, Art Criticism, and Explanation," rather, a cultural one. A work of art which is deemed 'excellent' and therefore canonized by one particular group may be either incomprehensible or merely irrelevant to another. Even if it retains its status as exemplar, it could very easily be for totally different reasons, as George Boas has aptly demonstrated in "The Mona Lisa in the History of Taste." Without an understanding of just how and why a specific work of art relates to a specific group, canonical claims serve only to promulgate a particular elitist or, better, 'special interest' viewpoint disguised as 'objective.' (Some) film criticism, in its attempt to justify its chosen material as a legitimate art form and therefore worthy of aesthetic notice, has inevitably fallen into the same morass as did art critics (and literary critics . . .) whose sole concern is canonical inclusion, i.e. the determination of the value of a work of art. But as Nelson Goodman writes, ". . . Works of art are not racehorses, and picking a winner is not the primary goal. Conceiving of aesthetic experience as a form of understanding results both in resolving and in devaluing the question of aesthetic value."

## CANONICAL CRITICISM

By establishing standards of taste that are naturalized as 'absolutes' yet are nevertheless highly subjective, a critic may thus attain a status of power that is seemingly invincible, for any attempt at a rebuttal or refutation can be easily dismissed by being attributed to 'wrong-mindedness' or worse, bad taste. In other words, the critical confrontation that ensues occurs at the level of the individual rather than at the level of the work of art, although it purports to be and do just the opposite. Pre-established notions of correct qualities dominate the critical discourse, with the critic pre- (because self-) established as the sole gatekeeper to the elevated heights of the (but really, his/her) canon. What we have, then, is Subjectivity *masquerading* as Objectivity, and the critic's assertion fetishized.

The only way to demystify canonical criticism is to recognize that there are indeed inherent biases and conceptual frameworks within each piece of critical text. As Harrison, Ramsden and Baldwin state:

It needs to be recognised that those who look at works of art, like those who make them, are engaged in a representational activity, which itself has multiple causes and determinations and ends, some shared, some inevitably marked off by differences in psychology, experience, and interests. The Modernist might perhaps reply that the authentic reading is provided by the person who is disposed towards, and experienced and interested in aesthetic experience. But he can't have it both ways. He can't then claim with any plausibility that aesthetic experience, and the objects of aesthetic experience, are in any way to be included in natural or transcendental categories [ . . . ] His best hope is that no one will notice the implausibility of identifying universal experience with the contingently produced experience of a minority.

The question that must be asked at this point, of course, is 'What is the purpose of an analysis/critique of a film?' Is it, as Rickman suggests, merely an opportunity to establish once and for all an untouchable body of cinematic masterpieces to the exclusion and derision of all other films ("lest this decidedly minor work [i.e. *The Wanderers*] find a place in the canon it doesn't deserve")? Is it to fix, once and for all, the meaning that the director intends us to get from watching the film? ("Just what the hell is Kaufman trying to say?") Is it to elevate its director into an authorial pantheon of cinematic greats à la Andrew Sarris, an approach which seldom takes into consideration that which separates film from all the other arts: the panoply of practitioners required at all stages of production to effect a completed work? All of these approaches are privileged, needless to say, in Rickman's critique of *The Wanderers*.

For my part, I find it difficult if not impossible to consider any of the above as suitable ends for a critical practice which desires to take into consideration current developments in critical thought. A critique whose purpose is to define its object in relation to a set standard of canonical work is hopelessly out-of-date in the late '80s. Most contemporary criticism is not about sacro-

sanct objects and superior subjects. Indeed, we know from Hermeneutical studies (Gadamer, Ricoeur, etc.) that there has been an important epistemological break with the Kantian notion of a discrete object with canonical characteristics in favour of a knowledge that is constantly in flux. If contemporary theory has taught us anything, it is that there are multiple positionings and multiple sensitivities that must be taken into account in order to render an inclusive, rather than an exclusive, reading. If feminist theory has taught us anything, it is that the personal is not just political, but may be emancipatory as well. As has been pointed out above, subjectivity which masquerades as objectivity is oppressive; but subjectivity which declares itself has the potential to be liberating. The recognition of one's own subjectivity is the first step towards an awareness and understanding of the external world. Criticism which begins with such a recognition may lead to revelations that matter, that are meaningful 'in the world.' The fact that they are not meaningful to everyone does not, in the end, matter; individual subjects seek their own meaning, a meaning which inevitably results from and relates to individual differences. Criticism that hides under the aegis of presumed objectivity ignores these differences; in fact actively seeks to repress them in order to valorize its own pronouncements. What should be sought after is a criticism that is non-repressive, that allows for differences, that shuns the restrictions of canonical claims. At this point, Rickman might ask: 'What about objectivity?' As I see it, the direction which theoretically informed criticism must take in the '80s is to *increase our understanding of the interrelationship between the experience of the subject and the construction of the object*. While most contemporary theories tend to privilege one over the other, a balance must be struck in order to provide for as complete and thorough an understanding as is humanly possible.

## THE NON-CANONICAL OBJECT

The films that I choose to write about, for the most part, are not films that are considered to be great masterpieces, nor are they usually films that have gained wide approval. My interest in film analysis is based on an attempt to come to an understanding of how and why certain films to have an effect on a specific audience, but I start with myself, and how I am moved, repelled, and/or made

to think by a particular film. According to Rickman, a film which is not worth canonizing is not worth writing about. But it's just those films, the small ones, the ones that take chances or appeal to limited audiences, that I find most interesting. Rickman could not understand a lot of *The Wanderers*. He questions its character individuation ("I had trouble simply telling the characters apart"), its rapid mood swings ("... have never worked for me as a way of telling a story"), its "lurid pseudo-expressionism" ("... which doesn't make any sense to me, rationally or emotionally"), its "shot of emotion" ("unearned by the film"), to cite just a few of his criticisms. While I could argue with him on each of these points — I disagree with his reading as strongly as he disagreed with mine — I am not interested in getting embroiled in a self-righteous competition at the personal level. Rather, I'd like to refer to two other objections he had to *The Wanderers*. I quote:

More relevant to *CineAction!* is the film's failure as social criticism (the boy's sexism is never really placed by the film, as can be seen in its celebratory presentation of 'elbow-tit' gaming, or, more arguably, in its development of Nina, who remains throughout her scenes an engaging cipher) or social history.

No one who has watched *The Wanderers* carefully could say that it was valorising the 'macho' behaviour of its four male protagonists, especially in the scene to which Rickman refers. The 'elbow-tit' game is presented as a social fact for these lower class boys, one of the means whereby they prove themselves to each other (one plays while the other three watch). However, Perry refuses to play, shrugging it off as a sign of immaturity; Joey gets bopped on the head and yelled at by his victim; and Richie finds that the one he chooses as his target, Nina, calls him on his actions. When he chases after her, apologetically, she belittles him for participating in such childishness. Granted, the film does not explicitly state its (politically correct) disapproval of the boys, but I think it makes perfectly clear that it is not, in fact, approving their behaviour. By bracketing the 'elbow-tit' scene with the device of an ironic soundtrack ("Big Girls Don't Cry"), and showing the consequences of their actions, the film clearly implies a critique. Nina is portrayed as an 'engaging cipher,' that is, her role is not fleshed out as well as it could have been, for the reason that her function in the film is to represent an

alternative to the community in which Richie lives, an alternative that Richie must ultimately reject. She's not real because she doesn't represent a real possibility for him. As I tried to demonstrate in "Getting A Fix On The Sixties," I feel that the entire film rather gently and poignantly marks out the restricted expectations and possibilities for these youths.

As for Rickman's view of *The Wanderers* as a failure as 'social history,' I am not exactly sure what he means. If, on the one hand, he is referring to a limited concept, that is, that *The Wanderers* fails to represent the '60s accurately enough (he criticises its use of the Kennedy assassination), then I can only remind him that the film is not a documentary, but a fiction, and, for this person who lived through the period, it struck the right chord. If, on the other hand, his use of the term 'social history' is general, then surely all films are items of social history; indeed, are cultural artifacts and as such, reflect the particular society and particular time period that produced them. Consequently, they may be opened up to a cultural analysis, for better or worse. □

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# MODERN DISEASES

## Gay Self-Representation in the Age of AIDS

"... cultural conventions rigidly dictate what can and will be said about AIDS ..."

SIMON WATNEY, *Policing Desire*

"That the two competing regimes could agree on the need for basic scientific work in virology and immunology — while avoiding any discussion of their ideological differences regarding public health and other policies affecting AIDS — creates the illusion that everyone is united in the struggle against the epidemic."

JOHN BORNEMAN, "AIDS in the Two Berlins"

"The argument for sexual diversity has the strategic advantage of making gays seem like passionate defenders of one of the primary values of mainstream liberal culture, but to make that argument is ... to be disingenuous about the relation between homosexual behaviour and the revulsion it inspires. The revulsion, it turns out, is all a big mistake: what we're really up to is pluralism and diversity, and getting buggered is just one moment in the practice of those laudable humanistic virtues."

LEO BERSANI, "Is the Rectum a Grave?"

"It is better to suck and fuck until your knees wobble, then to squander your youth on reformist politics."

TOM WARD, "Sex & Drugs & Ronald Reagan"

by Bryan Bruce

**THE** question of gay representation in the era of AIDS is, obviously, a 'loaded' one (to use, already a potentially 'politically incorrect' metaphor, considering Susan Sontag's comments on illness and "warfare" imagery); it covers an almost inconceivably broad range of social and political issues, and effects many of us on an everyday level to an extreme unimaginable before the advent of the epidemic. In its short history as part of the gay experience, AIDS has become both monolithic and taboo, arresting any discourse around homosexuality that does not account for it, yet making it

almost impossible to speak its name. This paralysis has, unfortunately, extended to any critical evaluation of gay representation coming from *within* the community (its representation from *without* having already been well documented<sup>1</sup>); AIDS 'swallows' critique, placing the forces of gay liberalism squarely in opposition to the 'general population,' and just as the latter is erroneously perceived as an undifferentiated mass (the illusion of the 'average' while middle class family unit as universal), the gay 'lib' (read, now, 'liberal') community becomes a cohesive, homogeneous entity, united and ideologically

sealed in its position of adversity. Although I take issue with much of the self-representation created by gays, both in art and aesthetic practice and in the broader implications of 'style,' neither do I particularly want, as Simon Watney does, to eliminate the category "homosexual." Watney describes the "homosexual body" (presumably encompassing the presentation of both the literal body and the larger 'body politic' of the gay movement) as "... a fictive collectivity of perverse sexual performances, denied any psychic reality and pushed out beyond the furthest margins of the social. This, after all, is what the

category of "the homosexual" (which we cannot continue to employ) was invented to do in the first place."<sup>2</sup> What Watney doesn't take into account is the obvious point that gays are equally responsible for their own representation in contradistinction to the "fictive body" invented by culture. Rather than annihilate "the homosexual" (what would please the moral majority more?), perhaps style and strategy should be considered in an attempt to *rethink* what it means to be homosexual in a 'virulently' homophobic society. Watney is, of course, aware of the hatred of gays for which AIDS has served as a convenient alibi, reminding us that the spectacularization of the epidemic "... calmly and consistently entertains the possible prospect of the death of all Western European and American gay men from AIDS — a total, let us say, of some twenty million lives, without the slightest flicker of concern, regret, or grief."<sup>3</sup> But the violent backlash against gays because of AIDS demonstrates for me just how far the movement had been co-opted: before becoming diseased and contagious in the public mind, gays were allowed to exist as long as they remained invisible, as long as their sexual acts were unspoken and confined to a restricted site (the 'ghetto,' the 'back-room'). The 'publicity' conferred upon gay sexual acts, particularly ass-fucking (not generally acknowledged equally as a potentially heterosexual activity), in the safe sex campaign shows us just how far out of the minds of the average heterosexual the reality of this 'alternative sexuality' had become. Now more than ever, as Leo Bersani (problematically) argues, the 'homosexual act' must be made visible: to quote Dr. Joseph Sonnabend, "One should take an aggressive view. The rectum is a sexual organ, and it deserves the respect that a penis gets and a vagina gets. Anal intercourse is a central sexual activity, and it should be supported, it should be celebrated."<sup>4</sup>

I'll return to the question of adherence to a 'sexual pluralism' against homosexual specificity as political strategy, arguing, in agreement with the opening quotation from Bersani, against the reformist tendencies of the former position. It should be clear from the quotations I've chosen that reformist politics and the operations of co-option will be the focus of the discussion of AIDS and gay representation to follow. Douglas Crimp acknowledges that AIDS is a playing out of meanings already fixed by cultural conventions, but does not consider how *subcultures*

have also limited themselves in some ways to a set of preconstructed responses. As John Borneman's study of AIDS in the Two Berlins proves, it's important to consider how the epidemic can create the illusion that everyone is united against the common 'enemy', all paltry ideological differences dissolved in the struggle to find a scientific cure for 'the disease.'<sup>5</sup> The now infamous debate between Doctors Gallo and Deuschberg amply demonstrates that the field of science is by no means exempt from the political, and has, in fact, revealed itself to be as corrupt as various governmental agencies in dealing with the crisis, particularly in its flagrant profiteering and capitalist motivations. As Paula A. Treichler describes it, "Our social constructions of AIDS ... are based not upon objective, scientifically determined 'reality,' but upon what we are told about this reality; that is, upon prior social constructions routinely produced within the discourses of biomedical science ... There is a continuum, then, not a dichotomy, between popular and biomedical discourses ..."<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, gay self-representation in the age of AIDS has not entirely escaped the problems of the popular discourse. There is a predominant myth, particular to the left, that to be homosexual is to be, automatically, political or politically activist, if not by nature then by cultural construction. Leo Bersani, one of the few queer writers on AIDS who has remained critical of the gay movement, makes the point when he reminds us "On the whole, gay men are no less socially ambitious, and, more often than we like to think, no less reactionary and racist than heterosexuals."<sup>7</sup> Of course, it's particularly risky to broach this kind of critique during a period of such upheaval and tragedy in gay history, and it must be balanced by an affirmative assessment of the community response to AIDS; as Douglas Crimp emphasizes, "... we must never lose sight of the fact that the gay movement is responsible for virtually every positive achievement in the struggle against AIDS during the epidemic's early years."<sup>8</sup> But the struggle to get funding from the government for AIDS research, lobbying for rights for PWAs, and so on — in short, the fight for a certain acceptance of gays as part of society — should not be collapsed into the kind of liberal reformism that has been slowly erasing gay radicalism since the early '70s. Simon Watney points out that "What AIDS actually means to different social groups will depend entirely on

where they find themselves within both the social formation and the structure of sexuality as it is currently on offer ...";<sup>9</sup> my critique of gay self-representation in several articles and videos about AIDS to follow will examine what the gay response to the disease tells us about the limitations this particular social group has set for itself.

Before getting to the questions raised by the works themselves, I want to situate my article more specifically within the context of this issue of *CineAction!* its function to delineate the critical positions of the members of the editorial collective more clearly than the mere adherence to a vague platform of leftist politics (feminism, gay rights, issues of class, race, etc.). My choice of subject, then, can be framed by three questions: 1) Why video and not film? Although I by no means advocate the abandonment of film criticism, there still exists an exclusivity, a legitimacy to the film medium that video has been denied. Film theory has in various quarters only reluctantly extended to 'video theory,' the language developed to articulate the former often obstinately disavowing a video equivalency. To make the obvious point, a critical position should be capable of encompassing all forms of representation — be it television talk shows, street style, tabloid gossip, or celebrity death — regardless of lingering notions of 'intellectual propriety.' In the case of studying AIDS, it would be not only impossible but absurd to restrict analysis to filmic representation, unless attempting a thesis on Glenn Close's interpretation of the disease in *Fatal Attraction* (which isn't a bad idea ...). Douglas Crimp describes the importance of video to the AIDS crisis:

To date, a majority of cultural producers working in the struggle against AIDS have used the video medium. There are a number of explanations for this: Much of the dominant discourse on AIDS has been conveyed through television, and this discourse has generated a critical counter-practice in the same medium; video can sustain a fairly complex array of information; and cable access and the widespread use of VCRs provide the potential of a large audience for this work.<sup>10</sup>

The work I'll be discussing is taken largely from a programme of AIDS videos screened at A Space in Toronto during AIDS awareness week comprised of tapes designed for a wide variety of audiences — artists, theoreticians, specific ethnic communities, IV

drug users, PWAs and so on, in many cases originally intended for broadcast on local cable stations in the US and Canada. Clearly, video provides a kind of direct and focussed access to social groups that remains outside of a strictly filmic discourse.

2) Why contemporary video (or film) and not classical Hollywood cinema? Again, I don't intend to dismiss completely critical work in *any* area of film, but to espouse undying commitment to old Hollywood in the name of 'accessibility' to the 'unwashed masses' seems to me more than a little disingenuous. A lot of contemporary Hollywood films have as much to do with music video conventions as with their filmic ancestors; the theoretical deconstruction of classical Hollywood cinema exclusively, or even as a focus, is no more accessible to the 'general public' than a treatise on the avant-garde, appealing primarily to academics and film buffs (i.e., the readership of *CineAction!*).

3) Why AIDS and gay self-representation? If I do not discuss other issues extensively, it's because I'm writing about what influences me on an everyday level. The AIDS phenomenon has, in many ways, repoliticized gays, but it has also made it more difficult to be critical of the movement without being perceived as, say, a repressed (or not so repressed) homophobe. Martha Gever has suggested "Just as AIDS has sanctioned expressions of homophobia and revived supposedly outmoded methods for controlling sexuality, the conflation of AIDS with homosexuality has clarified political positions for many gay men and lesbians";<sup>11</sup> the question remains, what exactly constitutes these political positions, and do they allow room for a critique from within?

**CONSIDER** the graphic I've chosen to accompany this article (see centrefold). Although easily mistaken for a modern interpretation of the struggle of gay men to find an 'AIDS vaccine,' it's actually a drawing that appeared under the heading "Had Your Asiatic Flu Shots?," borrowed from *Trim*, an example of the physique chapbook of the late '50s that functioned as a surreptitious pornography for the as yet unarticulated, but obviously present, gay audience. As a self-representation of an emerging gay identity, it's interesting to note how each carefully rendered signifier of the homosexual male is accommodated, and how consistent it is with the dominant discourse. The popular conflation of homosexuality with



André Burke's A: 'loaded' imagery.

homogeneity is immediately recognizable: each man is white, varying only between blond and brunet, each approximately the same height, weight, and of similar physical proportion, each characterized by a kind of crypto-fascist Tom of Finland-y interchangeability. The cosmology is unremittingly sexual, with even the clinical and mundane task of inoculation becoming erotically charged. Further, the historical constraints of representation, requiring the clever concealment of the genitals, fixes the sexual moment impossibly between the hypersexual overvaluation of the body and the erasure of sexual (or even biological) specificity. Simon Watney suggests that homosexuality is popularly theorized as "either an *absence* or an *excess* of "manliness";<sup>12</sup> here, and I would argue, generally today, absence and excess are posited simultaneously, giving us the homosexual male who is wholly identified with sexuality, yet whose sex acts are not allowed to enter the real. The violent backlash against gays since the advent of AIDS can be partially explained by this failure of representation: the homogenization of the gay image, combined with the disavowal of specific sexual activity, has become the prerequisite for the social acceptance of homosexuality — the precondition for co-option.

Now let's take a look at some more recent examples of self-representation by gay men, specifically, the safe(r) sex

campaign of the Gay Men's Health Crisis of New York. In his article "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," Douglas Crimp reprints a gay comic strip as an example of the reactionary governmental response to homosexual imagery in safe sex literature (the Helms amendment calling for its censorship). Although Crimp is very aware of the issues of women and minorities who've suffered equally from prejudices engendered by AIDS hysteria, making the point continually, the comic chosen to represent positive safe sex guidelines gives us all the signifiers of exclusive gay white male culture, surprisingly consistent with the drawing from the '50s previously discussed, albeit in a sexually explicit context. Again we are presented with two white men, virile, muscled, with big stiff cocks and equally proportioned bodies, indistinguishable except that one is blond and one brunet. Every annoying cliché of the majority of gay cartoons (see any issue of *Gay Comix*, or *Meatmen* vols. 1 through 3) is integrated into this short strip, from the banal sex banter and the knocked over bowl of fruit (actually that's kind of funny) to more insidious ideological operations: a) The fetishization of the working class. The familiar scenario in gay male pornography (and literature) of the sexy domestic or utilities employee (here, a plumber) as idealized sexual object serves as a diversion from the real implications of the relation of







**Chance of a Lifetime:** reactionary cowboy fantasies by the pool.

the working class to the gay community. Homosexuality in itself no more presupposes a dissolution of class difference than it does a predisposition to 'liberal' or 'artistic' values; reducing the working class figure to a singular sexual animalism affords the upper middle gay establishment a convenient 'class amnesia,' downplaying its own capitulation to capitalist values, and ignoring the difference in attitudes toward homosexuality in various class strata. Leo Bersani describes the same phenomenon: "While it is indisputably true that sexuality is always being politicized, the ways in which *having sex* politicizes are highly problematical. Right-wing politics can, for example, emerge quite easily from a sentimentalizing which can itself prolong and sublimate a marked sexual preference for sailors and telephone linemen."<sup>13</sup> b) Cultural homogeneity. Although other products of the GMHC give equal representation to minorities (the safe sex video to be discussed subsequently, for example), skin colour is often treated merely as a minor deviation from the norm, like hair colour or tank-top versus rolled up t-shirt in the strip. Cultural difference, like class, is swallowed by the apparent predilection of the gay community to 'clone,' so that racial minorities, for example, are only accepted if they conform to the regulation shape, size, age, and style of the western homosexual image.

If Crimp can refer to the comic strip

in question as "... innocuous little drawings of gay male sex"<sup>14</sup>, it's because the issue is framed entirely within the debate of 'AIDS politics,' the parameters of which are assumed to be ideologically fixed. Of course this cartoon is going to be deemed "demeaning" and "repugnant" to the moral majority (it's about two men fucking, after all), but it is unstated and implicit that it won't be offensive to a gay person (or to the liberal readership of *October*), even if for an entirely different set of reasons. The presumption of an ideological unity on the left transcending minor political differences, or even more dangerously, a strict and easily defined stratification of the political spectrum, left and right, plays neatly into the presuppositions of the dominant discourse: those faggots really *are* all alike.

On the surface, *Chance of a Lifetime*, a gay safe sex porn video also produced by the GMHC, seems to escape many of the problems evidenced by the comic strip, but a closer examination reveals the gap between an integrated and actualized political rethinking of sexual praxis and a 'politically correct' simulation of it. The tape consists of three sections, each presenting a variation on gay male sex. In the first episode, an average gay white male has a hot date with an average gay black male after a long period of celibacy. Their sex acts are confined to his apartment, and are relatively tame ('normal'). The second epi-

sode is set in a racially diverse leather bar, concentrating on the sex between a Hispanic masochist and a white (Aryan) sadist (although they switch roles by the end), both indicating a preference for promiscuous activity. The last episode gives us two white 'clones' with facial hair, a top and a bottom (who is also a PWA) in a monogamous relationship, frolicking by the pool. In each segment the emphasis is on the illustration of 'safer sex' practice as playful and satisfying.

Obviously the idea of safe sex pornography is sound, as is the attempt at a racially integrated depiction of gay sexual activity. The failure of the tape, then, is not in its theoretical project, but in its refusal to rethink pornography along with sex. Like the typical contemporary sex video, formal considerations are almost completely abandoned in favour of the expedient capturing of the sexual moment — or, in the case of *Chance of a Lifetime*, the *safe* sexual moment — aesthetic considerations subservient to the 'message,' which becomes particularly urgent and immediate in the context of AIDS. The effect is of a singularity, a flattening out of meaning that presumes a separability of the political and aesthetic dimensions, as if the political is somehow impeded by aesthetic practice. The argument goes like this: "How can we quibble over the question of a gay aesthetic, formal mediation, or issues of style when lives are at stake? The message of safe sex must be presented as straightforwardly and clearly as possible..." AIDS is a health crisis, and a serious one, of course, but it is also a point of political crisis in gay history. It's ridiculous to think that everyone become clear cut under AIDS, that all situational conflicts will be resolved in the fight against it. The epidemic has been viewed by the community as a kind of eye-opening revelation to all the discrimination and hatred directed towards homosexuals (attesting to the extent to which gay culture had been previously co-opted), but the reaction often seems to go no further than this, the subtext that things will eventually go back to much the same as they were before, that the only thing separating then from now is a thin membrane of latex rubber.

*Chance of a Lifetime* is a good example of this refusal to use AIDS as an opportunity to rethink the gay movement. Although somewhat more differentiated in its representation of fags than the average pornography, the familiar enunciation of an ideologically homogeneous social group is still

apparent. The first and third sections, presenting typical monogamous domestic situations, give us upwardly mobile middle class men (signified by their appreciation of the 'finer things' — rich food and fine wine, an overvaluation of 'quality' leisure activity), playing out heterosexual models of romantic coupling. The black man in the first segment remains culturally undifferentiated (read white), only a slight variation on the almost indistinguishable moustached duo of the last segment, who act out reactionary cowboy fantasies by the pool. The middle section provides the (presumably) only other sexual option available to gay men — the promiscuity of the bar scene — culminating in 'safe' backroom s&m activity.

Although the video aches with a nostalgia for the 'gay lifestyle' of the '70s, it is, arguably, designed for the people it represents, targeted for a specific gay audience that does exist. But to make a perhaps obvious point, safe sex material, as a guide to sexual practice, is, unavoidably, by its very nature, *prescriptive*, and in this respect, *Chance of a Lifetime* advocates the idea that nothing, besides the adoption of precautionary sex, will or should change in the gay community in the era of AIDS. The formal lassitude of the tape, combined with its formulaic, pointedly balanced, yet ultimately insubstantial presentation of racial equality, reinforces this one-dimensional platform of politically correct dogma sanctioned by the urgency of an epidemic.

I want now to consider a couple of tapes that can't be contained within the 'politically correct' orthodoxy of the gay community: a music video by Coil, a British industrial band, for their cover of Soft Cell's "Tainted Love," and an art video by A. Burke entitled *A*. The difference between these two videos and most others I've seen on the subject of AIDS is the use of metaphor, or, in Barthesian terms, the use of vertical, as well as horizontal, narrative codes, as opposed to the usual attempt to deal strictly with objective and quantifiable truths about the disease. In "Illness as Metaphor," a work written before the AIDS phenomenon, and which today, in retrospect, seems in some ways vaguely reactionary, Susan Sontag, has this to say about disease and representation: "My point is that illness is *not* a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness . . . is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking."<sup>15</sup> Aside from the questionable assumption that disease can, by

some unspecified mental discipline, remain detached from "metaphoric thinking," the disavowal of metaphor Sontag proposes not only resorts to empirical categories ("truth," "purity") as the alternative, but also suggest that there are subjects too serious, too 'real' to be delivered as tropes. Along these lines, Sontag also argues that "Cancer is a rare and still scandalous subject for poetry, and it seems unimaginable to aestheticize the disease."<sup>16</sup> Here, again, the 'aesthetic' is framed as a superfluous, even meretricious practice that merely dilutes the seriousness of an issue, an apolitical term inappropriate for such weighty matters. For me, the two videos in question work precisely because they 'aestheticize' AIDS and use metaphors to come to terms with it, allowing for a discourse, or even a sense of 'romance,' around the disease. In so doing, meaning is liberated from the fixity of univocal leftist rhetoric which presupposes a limited and 'proper' response to the epidemic.

The Coil video, commissioned by the Terence Higgins Trust, an English AIDS organization to which all proceeds from the single were donated, was perceived as scandalous upon its release, disowned by the charity it was intended for, and condemned by various gay organizations (such as ACCESS video) in both Britain and America. Coil's cover of Tainted Love is a slowed-down, melodramatic dirge that, itself, serves as an ironic inversion of Soft Cell's coy, pre-AIDS disco version; the video takes the 'joke' a step further. In a cameo appearance, Marc Almond (the Soft Cell singer), dressed in leather and eating a handful of grapes, enters the hospital room of his lover ill with AIDS, laughs and throws a rose on the bed before making his exit. This scene is intercut with the image of flies being slowly covered by pouring honey. The meaning of this visual interpretation is completely dependant on the recasting of an innocent pop song about a love gone wrong (which was an international hit in gay discos at the height of their popularity) as a brooding meditation on the implications of the effect of AIDS on the gay lifestyle, the spectre of Marc Almond returning to remind us that it can never be the same again. The flies and honey imagery can be interpreted in several ways: 'a fly in the ointment,' 'a sticky situation,' an ironic conflation of sweetness and death, etc. I found the video sad and scary, but not offensive, for various reasons. For one, it's presented as a personal, not a prescriptive, document (it's not signified as a behav-

journal guide like *Chance of a Lifetime*, for example), as one instance of tragedy in an epidemic. It's also designed, with the presence of Marc Almond, as a metaphorical rendering of the advent of AIDS — the death of innocence, or of the innocent '70s, the historical referencing of a musical icon in relation to gay identity, and so on. Finally, the video is perpetrated, to some degree, as an irreverent spectacle bordering on the 'bad joke,' an audacious gesture intended to provoke, and it is *only* this kind of gesture that is able to dislodge the complacency of leftist doctrine. What I find most remarkable about the video is that it manages to be melancholy and ironic at the same time, functioning both as a lament for those abandoned by lovers because of AIDS and as disruptive black humour.

In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes describes how, in the operations of narrative, the "vertical codes" — the thematic, cultural, and symbolic — confound the linearity of the "horizontal" hermeneutic and proairetic codes, those which serve to advance the action of the plot. The vertical codes, he maintains, ". . . establish permutable, reversible connections . . ." while the horizontal codes ". . . impose their terms according to an irreversible order . . ." which fixes or blocks meaning through an appeal to "truth" and "empiricism."<sup>17</sup> Further, Barthes makes claims for the "non-decidability" of the symbolic code, arguing that to deny this hesitation or uncertainty of the text is to close off meaning: ". . . to miss the plurality of the codes is to censor the work of the discourse . . ."<sup>18</sup>

André Burke's art tape *A*, made at UCLA in 1986, offers, like the Coil video, a set of disturbing and, certainly, 'politically incorrect' metaphors to describe his confusion and despair on the subject of AIDS. On first viewing, I decided the work was reactionary, but after watching it repeatedly, it was exactly the "non-decidability" of its symbols I found myself drawn to. The tape is extremely confused and complex, composed largely of rapid montages of images, as many as three overlaid simultaneously, with an overdetermined use of keying and filling. Designed as a kind of personal nightmare about AIDS, the 10-minute tape covers a wide range of issues — from misconceptions about the etiology of the epidemic, to the Nazi persecution of gays as a metaphor for AIDS-era prejudices, to the pop psychology and 'New Age' approaches to curing disease. Rather than attempt to explain and decipher every symbol, I

want to invoke the most potentially controversial and upsetting moment of the video: the image of a gun poised at, then fucking, a man's ass. It's probably not too useful to attempt an actual defence of this kind of image; instead, I'll concentrate on the effect of the gesture on discursive practice, and the importance of contextualizing imagery.

Part of the power of the image in question is its self-consciousness as a 'loaded' symbol, the gun standing in for all the anxiety that AIDS has generated around the act of ass-fucking; the tape is, in fact, heavily signified, both in its illogical narrative structure and its focus on the symbolic, as an anxiety dream about sex and AIDS; that is, as a product of the *unconscious*. Susan Sontag's apparent desire to eliminate illness as metaphor involves, necessarily, the attempt to deny or control the uncon-

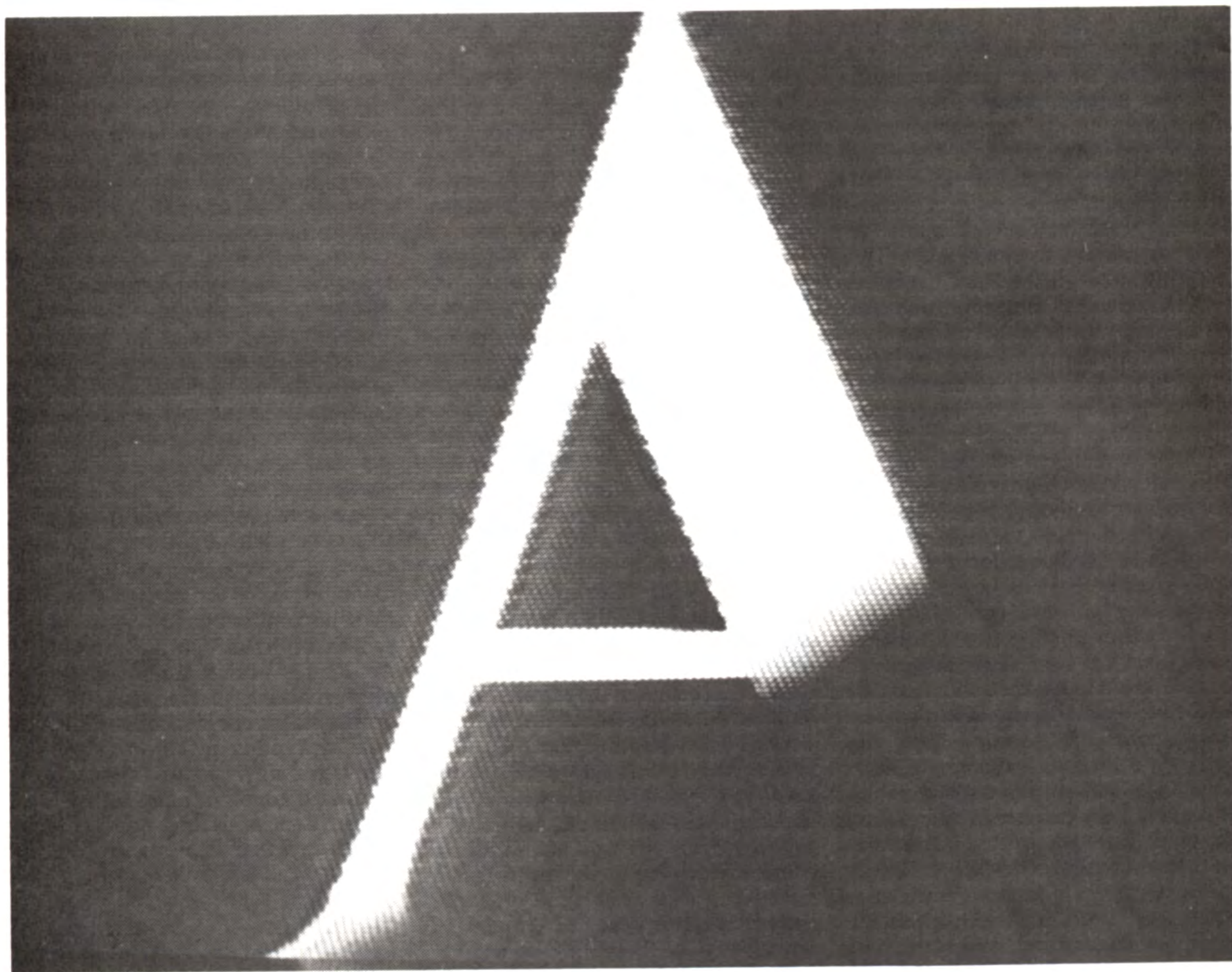
scious, to think exclusively in logical and linear and 'proper' terms about the disease. A. Burke's tape accomplishes exactly the opposite: AIDS is treated as a personal nightmare in which there are no limitations set on what can be said or thought about it, no empirical truths to be embraced. The requisite denial of subjectivity involved in the affiliation to any doctrinaire political line is replaced here by the working through of doubts, anxieties, and misconceptions about AIDS, the tape acting against any blockage of discourse by freeing representation from prescribed limits. The title itself, *A*, refers to the inability of the narrative to speak the word AIDS, the acronym, and everything that has accumulated around it, having become even more terrifying than the disease itself.

*A* builds to the resolution of a dream-

narrative partially constructed throughout, a male, then female narrator (a woman, Susan Pollack, having acted as assistant director and co-editor of the video) piecing together the following allegory:

(Man's voice) "I was in the back of the bus, hunched over like I was sick. They found some papers in my coat pocket, and I was screaming, and when they saw what it was, they all got scared. I stood there naked in the snow, disinfecting, sprayed with that stuff, and it turned out I wasn't sick at all."

(Woman's voice) "And the funny thing was, when he was screaming, he never said the word, just the beginning, before he got shut up, like saying it was worse than having it even. He just said 'I've got A.'"



André Burke's *A* (disappearing).

The final line is accompanied by sharp violins and distorted, mechanized laughter, successfully simulating the quality of a nightmare. Even more remarkable than this fearful climax is the credit sequence that follows, during which the capital "A," having appeared as a motif throughout, is gradually erased, accompanied by a verbal text: "... I knew ... that maybe there would come a day when ... a word or a letter or a name couldn't be evil, because it couldn't be anything more than what it was. And only then, I knew, when there was no more word for it, and no way of saying it, even, only then would I be rid of the disease that afflicts me."

I quote this narration at length to emphasize the importance of considering how images are mediated by context. The closing moments of *A* account for the earlier use of incendiary imagery by positing it as a means to speaking the unspeakable: the power of AIDS to arrest discourse is exploded by allowing it to be spoken at its most extreme and shocking moment. It's also important to consider the connotations in *A* of the parallels between the persecution of homosexuals in Nazi Germany and modern day hatred of gays under the aegis of AIDS (a connection also made by Stuart Marshall's video *Bright Eyes*). In this context, the gun poised at the ass takes on a different meaning, standing in for the violent reaction against any act perceived as specifically homosexual. It's precisely metaphor, then, and the overdetermination of the symbolic code, that, finally, overcome the language that has been sanctioned and approved to speak AIDS. What I'm arguing against, ultimately, is the kind of censorship of discourse Barthes speaks of, as if AIDS obliges a singular, undifferentiated response from the gay community at the expense of subjectivity. This call for a heterogeneity of gay self-representation should not, however, be confused with notions of sexual diversity which downplay, almost apologetically, the 'homosexual act.'

In his article "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in the AIDS issue of *October* Leo Bersani sets out the terms of this debate, crucial to representation. The argument he starts off from makes sense to me — attacking the positions of several prominent theorists (Jeffrey Weeks, Gayle Rubin, Simon Watney) for diluting the specificity of homosexuality, for promoting a sexual pluralism along with a theoretical or political one. He points out that these arguments for a "diversity" of sex practices, derived

from "the rhetoric of sexual liberation in the '60s and '70s," are "... unnecessarily and even dangerously tame" in their attempt to recast gay sex as "pastoralizing" and "redemptive," as an opening up of pleasure and the sexual possibilities of the body. Bersani perceives this approach as "... a certain refusal to speak frankly about gay sex ...," although making no claims that homosexuality is "reducible to one form of sexual activity or that the sexual itself is a stable, easily observable, or easily definable function."<sup>19</sup> I agree with Bersani's refutation of notions of sexual pluralism, if not as a rationalization for a convoluted ontology.<sup>20</sup> I have been arguing against aspects of homosexual representation that serve as preconditions for cultural co-option: if all faggots (or dykes) look alike, act alike, confine themselves to the demarcation zone, and do not publicly flaunt their sexual behaviour, then society will tolerate them as a marginal deviation from the norm. If, however, homosexuality is presented as a widespread, differentiated and *unpredictable* variable, not restricted to a particular class or race, or limited by a theory of biological predisposition, then, strategically, it remains much more threatening and unstoppable. This is by no means a call for assimilation — deviance must always be encouraged and expressed, but only in such ways that elude, rather than become complicit with, the recuperative powers of the heterosexual majority. There have been attempts made, for example, to defend the adoption by gay men of a uniform hyper-masculine style and attitude as a parody of heterosexual male behavioural patterns. Leo Bersani argues convincingly, against this rationalization, that macho style tends to collapse parody and fetish, resulting in "a profound respect for machismo itself" rather than offer any threat to entrenched gender positions: "The very real potential for subversive confusion in the joining of female sexuality ... and the signifiers of machismo is dissipated once the heterosexual recognizes in the gay-macho style a *yearning* toward machismo, a yearning that, very conveniently for the heterosexual, makes the leather queen's forbidding armor and warlike manners a *perversion* rather than a *subversion* of real maleness."<sup>21</sup> A heterogeneous gay image must be cultivated to upset this fixed binary code of perversion set against and defined by normalcy, not by eradicating 'the homosexual' through an appeal to some utopian diversified sexuality, but by stating homosexuality

clearly and unapologetically outside of contexts invented to regulate its expression. The AIDS crisis offers an opportunity to rethink the gay movement, and to rethink our subjectivities within it; rather than allow AIDS to limit or censor the discourse around homosexuality, or more importantly, around gay radicalism, AIDS should be regarded as the chance to explode it.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Stuart Marshall's video *Bright Eyes* and Martha Gever's analysis of it, "Pictures of Sickness: Stuart Marshall's *Bright Eyes*" in *October* #43.
2. Simon Watney, "The Spectacle of AIDS," *October* #43, Cambridge, London, MIT Press, 1987, p. 79.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
4. Quoted by Michael Callen in "Media Watch (And It's Still Ticking)," *October* #43, Cambridge, London, MIT Press, 1987, p. 151.
5. The video *Till Death Do Us Part* by the Everyday Theatre Youth Ensemble and Ginny Durrin, screened as part of the A space programme "AIDS and the Black Community," is a good example of how liberal co-option can extend to embrace reactionary work in the interests of 'solidarity' and 'good intentions.' The tape presents a young black couple who espouse heterosexual monogamy while a trio of black Christian rappers urge the duo to "trust in God our father, Amen" to get us through the epidemic. A variety of temptations are overcome by the strict adherence to familial and religious institutions. At the end of the tape, we are offered these rules to fight AIDS: 1) Don't have sex 2) But if you choose to have sex, always use a condom 3) Don't do drugs. Conveniently, the avoidance of sex and drugs and the repression of desire are emphasized over safe practices to accommodate them.
6. Paula A. Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Significance," *October* #43, Cambridge, London, MIT Press, 1987, p. 35.
7. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave," *October* #43, Cambridge, London, MIT Press, 1987, p. 205.
8. Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October* Cambridge, London, MIT Press, 1987, p. 250.
9. Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 36.
10. Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism," *October* #43, Cambridge, London, MIT Press, 1987, p. 14.
11. Martha Gever, "Pictures of Sickness: Stuart Marshall's *Bright Eyes*," *October* #43, Cambridge, London, MIT Press, 1987, p. 126. Although the focus of this article is the gay male response to the AIDS crisis, the contri-

butions of women to a discourse around the disease should be emphasized. Along with the articles in the *October* #43 AIDS issue by women that I've referred to, Cindy Patton's *Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS* should be acknowledged as one of the most important early analyses of the ideology of AIDS.

12. Simon Watney, *Policing Desire*, p. 26.
13. Bersani, p. 206.
14. Crimp ("How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic"), p. 263.
15. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, New York, Random House, Inc., 1978, p. 3. There are many ideas espoused by Sontag in this work that become startlingly relevant today, but which, in recasting them in the context of AIDS, must be carefully screened. For example, Sontag tends to refute the theory of "co-factors" in the etiology of disease. She does acknowledge the theory itself ("... it is ... generally agreed that cancer is multi-determined. A variety of factors — such cancer-causing substances ("carcinogens") in the environment, genetic make-up, lowering of immune defenses (by previous illness or emotional trauma), characterological predisposition — are held responsible for the disease. And many researchers assert that cancer is not one but more than a hundred clinically distinct disease ... " (p. 59) ), but goes on to say that "... cancer may be one disease after all and that it may ... have a principal causal agent and be controlled by one program of treatment." (p. 60) Her most suspect claim, however, follows from the acceptance of this "single agent" theory: "The notion that a disease can be explained only by a variety of causes is precisely characteristic of thinking about disease whose causation is *not* understood. And it is diseases thought to be multi-determined (that is, mysterious) that have the widest possibilities as metaphors for what is felt to be socially or morally wrong." (p. 60) When "AIDS" is substituted for "cancer," Sontag's argument is clearly reversed. Rather than consider a wide range of possible causes for AIDS, the medical establishment and its champion, Dr. Robert Gallo, have become fixated on the notion of a single virus (actually a retrovirus) responsible for the weakening of the immune system and the resultant inability to fight off "opportunistic infections." This theory is conveniently complicit with the tendency to target specific individuals or social groups as the source of the epidemic, diverting attention from the "co-factoralist" claims that the etiological basis for the disease encompasses a broader network of ideologically specific concerns. It's the exclusive HIV theory that allows homosexuals, lower income minorities, junkies, and other 'undesirables' to become the sole 'carriers' of the disease; as Simon Watney has pointed out, "the HIV virus has manifested itself in ... constituencies which are already feared and marginalized in the west, ... the presence of AIDS in these groups ... generally perceived not as accidental, but as a symbolic extension of some imagined inner essence of being, manifesting

itself as disease." (*Policing Desire*, p. 8.) Conversely, multi-determination theories open up interpretation to include potential co-factors in AIDS etiology attributable to various empowered institutions: variables such as political corruption (both within and outside of the Drug Administration), governmental inaction on environmental issues, class inequities, discrimination against minorities — even conspiracy theories implicating the CIA. Further, Sontag's argument does not acknowledge how typical of modern, particularly western, medicine it is to assume that illness exists in a vacuum irrespective of environmental or political determinants, that the disease itself is to be isolated and cured rather than looking at symptoms, their cause and possible prevention, that there is a single explanation, and alternative theories should not be considered — especially those which indict the medical and political establishments.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
17. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1974, p. 30.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
19. Bersani, p. 219.
20. I don't want to labour too much over a critique of Bersani's odd ontological justification of anal sex, but I should make it clear that although I agree with many of his criticisms of gay culture, I do not subscribe to his pessimistic, typically semiotic theory of sexual determinism. Bersani buys heavily into the Lacanian notion of the ego born in conflict, split between a projected fantasy of wholeness and unity — the ego ideal — and an inability to reconcile this image with a fragmented and uncontrolled experience of the self, a model based on Lacan's theory of the mirror phase. The child (so the story goes) eventually learns to control the mirrored reflection of self and make it disappear,

which becomes the first operation of language — the murder of the thing itself. This belief allows Bersani to make the claim that sexuality "may be a tautology for masochism" inasmuch as masochism is "... the psychical strategy that partially defeats a biologically dysfunctional process of maturation." (Bersani, p. 217) In other words, the child learns to survive by finding pleasure in the presumably human inability to constitute itself as subject. (Like Lacan, Bersani argues that this isn't an essentialist position because it depends not on biological specificity, but on a theory of perceptual development, failing to acknowledge the latter as equally deterministic.) Sexuality, then, (i.e., masochism) is nothing more than a fetishization of lack, of our inability to function properly, and of the annihilation of the "self," which, according to Bersani, is merely a "practical convenience" anyway, "promoted to the status of an ethical ideal," and thus becoming "a sanction for violence." (Bersani, p. 222) Here we have the familiar semiotic disavowal of subjectivity, the imperfect ego, passively inserted into language, totally at the mercy of the whims of the signifier. He goes on to argue that male homosexuality in particular presents the opportunity to celebrate the extinction of "selfhood," since the "internalized phallic male" must be sacrificed in order to experience "the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman." (Bersani, p. 212) I don't find it very useful to theorize women and 'passive' gay men into the position of 'happy victims' who can, alone, transcend the illusory restrictions imposed by a fixed model of ego development through "sacrifice" "ecstasy," and the loss of self-control, ancient associations with femininity which must be abandoned. When it comes right down to it, there's nothing particularly transcendental about getting fucked, up the ass or otherwise.

21. Bersani, p. 207.

# THE SCHWARZENEGGER POEMS

by Jim Smith

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# CLASS STRUGGLE at the Movies ?

by Scott Forsyth

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If history is still the history of class struggle, and I think it is, we often find it hard to discover this when we're at the movies or when we read cultural criticism, even radical criticism. That, however, is Marxist criticism's over-arching strategy and purpose — to connect art and class struggle.

That is my answer to the question *CineAction!* has posed — what is the function of criticism? Think about art historically, of both necessity and transformation, in the present as history. See that capitalism's relentless revolutionizing of production constantly produces conflict and crises in all social relations and processes and that culture reflects, transforms and imbeds these social, historical and political

imperatives everywhere in our lives. Discover the ways art and culture encourage or forestall the political organization of social conflict that will change the world. History, revolution . . . simple enough.

Marxism — vulgar, orthodox, traditional, revolutionary — *should* promise drama and belligerence. As a notoriously immodest social theory which also means to overthrow capitalism and class society, Marxism's enormous interest in culture is crucially politicized, but also consistently aesthetic. Many Marxists have valued art because of its autonomy from production, because its privileged imagination could be seen as pre-figuring the world of harmonious social relations lost but re-capturable, that its production and consumption offer a glimmer of the self-conscious practice of liberated humanity. Others have emphasized art's reflection of class reality, its production of knowledge and ideology and placed it within political practice, sometimes in simple-minded subordination. Like all of Marxism, this is a difficult and heterogeneous history, but I would maintain that there is an inherent and advantageous tension between the political and the aesthetic, that a committed criticism requires such a dialectic. In what follows, I will comment upon the political and programmatic basis, rather than methods or demonstration, of such leftist criticism.

The function of criticism? Sounds like a conference panel — I would head for the nearest bar. Here, it is meant to highlight factional and theoretical differences within *CineAction!* — in which case readers may be heading for the nearest bar, fearful for one of those displays of "the narcissism of small differences" endemic to academics and the Left. But I'll forge on, it's a generic requirement in this sort of dispute to avoid brevity. Criticism is, after all, in the most obvious answer to the question, a job. This isn't cynical, entirely. The question almost speaks from an institutional persona, because criticism only has a designated function when it relates to an institution; the daily critic completing the commodity circuit of a movie, the university critic confirming the value of the canon. I could comment on the comparative place of such institutional intellectuals in the social strata of late capitalism — film critics taking their place among the pampered and non-productive professional and managerial ranks, perhaps less venal than stockbrokers, more "modern" than Classics professors, less disliked than lawyers, more sedentary than fitness consultants, less parasitical than . . . etc.

Notwithstanding such nuances, politically committed criticism hopes for an "institutional" connection to movements for social change. That should displace, or at least challenge and encompass, criticism as a professional pursuit in which slightly different interpretations compete like gentlemen for true judgment; in the micro-politics of pedagogy, all interpretations in their sumptuous plurality validate the dominant institution — cinema, literature, criticism, the university. Leftist criticism, in contrast, should minimally form part of a left public sphere in which dominant culture is analyzed and contested, in which radical cultural practice connects consciously to political practice.

But debates about the purpose of film and cultural criticism do indicate something of a crisis, an opening for politics. There is dissatisfaction, not just from Marxists, with the newly orthodox melange of semiotics and psychoanalysis — post structuralism or, just, Theory — which threatens political motivation with professional enervation, which reduces or ignores the aesthetic specificity which first inspired the serious study of film. Axiomatically, I am opposed to Theory as an object unto itself, a specialized rhetoric, which removes criticism from the World, as Said and many others have

eloquently argued. Just as certainly, Marxism is against the resuscitation of liberal and humanist panaceas, whose ideological and institutional vigour is by no means meagre, for the dilemmas of the intelligentsia or bourgeois culture.

As Gramsci said about intellectuals and philosophers, despite the weight of institutional functions, we (the people, so to speak) are all critics, we all respond and struggle with art and culture and its meanings and values. There should be an irreducibly democratic and practical core to criticism. To put it differently, I was a Marxist and communist before I thought "seriously" about film, but I was immersed in film and popular culture like anyone, learning art and life, domination and opposition, critical long before I thought "politically." Criticism for me should contain this democratic core, while basing itself on the particularity of a political position, outside and against the disciplinary nuances and methodological tangles of the academy. The political, in turn, should be seen as the social process where humanity confronts domination by class, can begin to make its own history. Its core is materially pragmatic, about the relationships and effective organization of class and state domination . . . and opposition. Current cultural criticism often diffuses the political into the personal, the textual, the cultural — all the permutations abstracted as *the* political. But I define my place in criticism politically, in the context of crisis, against stability anywhere — the crisis of advanced capitalism and imperialism, the crisis of socialism, the consequences for Marxism. For me, criticism should always be in crisis, too, since it is just a local occasion of the broader political and analytical conflicts, grounded in theory, in practice, in history, in the moment.

## CRISIS, WHAT CRISIS?

Even while world capitalism is secure in its advanced bastions, even while its ideologues swamp us with nauseating class self-congratulation, we should not underestimate the depth and longevity of its own irrational and perennial crises. Despite the inane announcement of new supra-national, post-industrial, micro-chip, futuristic self-definitions, capitalism remains mundanely comprehensible. In much the way Marxists have always analyzed, the world economy's last two decades have been marked by intense and spiralling boom/bust cycles, with only partial and uneven recoveries. We have watched classic swings of over-production and under-utilization, heightened monopoly concentration and vicious competition. The absolute dominance of finance capital has fuelled a perpetual debt crisis constantly threatening to explode in inter-imperialist rivalries or precipitate local or world depression. It has also been part of an ostensible merely "technological" re-structuring, in which the destruction of capital's old industrial heartlands merges with an ephemeral service and information economy; the attenuation of the capitalist state's social and welfare functions co-exists with the exorbitation of its repressive and military apparatus. The brutal class agenda of this process are clear — large-scale immiseration alongside the "pathological prosperity" of haute and petty-bourgeoisie, authoritarian intensification of class exploitation and discipline, frenzied capital accumulation at the expense of production.

This moment succeeds and partially negates the period of post-war collective prosperity, the long boom marked by the social contract between labour and capital sometimes called Fordism, a balance between social peace in production and the guarantees of mass consumption. That prosperity was always partial and provisional, always co-temporaneous with

exploitation and imperial violence; the development of a more vicious, class-divided and class-celebrating advanced capitalism should not make us nostalgic for slight variations in its features. But if consumer capitalism has shed its more democratic face or the gluttonous snarl of the yuppie and the entrepreneur, the robber barons in their Trump Towers have not yet secured systemic stability over the irrationality of capitalism; that was signalled on Black Monday, last October.

It is important to recall that the crisis was swept along by imperialism's defeats — especially in Indochina, but over the long wave of revolutionary anti-colonial struggles from the '40s to the '70s — China, Indonesia, Korea, Cuba, Yemen, Angola, Mozambique, Guine, Chile, Ethiopia, Iran, Nicaragua . . . Even if this litany can be counter-pointed with defeat and disappointments, with retreat into neo-colonialism, it is a story of world human liberation that irreversibly marks the epoch. Even now, as the economic crisis is also exported and relocated to emerging third world capitalist dictatorships, in state-led and wage-slave industrialization, in the impoverishment of permanent plantation economies, in the International Monetary Fund's starvation austerity for half of the world's people, this threatens everywhere to erupt into revolutionary battles.

Over-arching these familiar structures and struggles, there remains the fundamental division in world politics, the confrontation between imperialism and communism. Part of the fall from American hegemony was caused by the military and economic might of the Communist third of the world. Its strength (and its weakness relative to imperialism's world domination) remains at the centre of any assessment of capitalist restructuring, of the horrible intransigence of imperialist onslaughts against revolution or even reform in Europe's old colonies, of the ideological centrality of anti-communism in the first world, of the drive all the way to the brink of world war to roll back defeats for capital's unquenchable drives. Indeed the historic funeral notice to capital accumulation announced by the Bolshevik Revolution remains a pivot from which to consider the epoch.

So, the world system apparently propels toward depression, famine or war, and the contours of systematic oppositional struggle should be urgently examined, even if revolutionary practice is everywhere uneven and nowhere certain, even if we just want to go to the movies.

## OPPOSITION AND SOCIALISM

Any period contains promise of the renewal of struggle and danger of defeat and disillusionment. But continued faith in the durability of the socialist project is the basis of my politics. If revolution in an advanced nation remains both distant and crucial, we should not forget that the period of crisis began with mass struggles within those countries — against Vietnam, racism, sexual oppression, in massive class confrontations in France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Britain, Quebec — which suffered defeats and frustrations which still cripple us, but shook our ruling classes. New capitalist strategies have met with heroic and defensive resistance by every working class, with defeat nowhere absolute. The organizational strength of the class in unions, remains the key variable in the long-term resolution of the crisis; it is the linch-pin for any hope for building on this opposition and towards socialism. This is so not just because class remains the irreducible definition and contradiction of capitalism, but because the working class alone has the social power, location and organ-

ization to threaten capital. This does not lessen the crucial importance, as well, of the remaining strength of the "new" movements of women, gays, ecology, peace and international solidarity which have resisted many of the specific strategies and tactics of the conjuncture. The oppressed have not meekly accepted the new poverty, new moralism, revived Patriarchy, "restricted" democracy or new imperial adventures.

At the same time, the revolutionary crises of the Third World which placed imperialism on the defensive and provoked its vicious counter-attacks, show no sign of slackening; from the Philippines to Haiti to El Salvador to the extraordinary bravery of the Koreans or Palestinians or South African blacks against brutal military repression — no continent is without its potential stunning example of revolution on the rise. The enduring nature of such struggles objectively effects the variations in imperial tactics, from containment to roll-back, which mark the last decades of imperialism's dirty history. The awesome importance of these struggles for the first world — in solidarity struggles, as transmission belts of radicalization to the racially and ethnically oppressed layers of the working class, those enclaves of the third world in the belly of the first, in precipitating yet greater crises of accumulation — can not be underestimated.

The remaining element of optimism exists in the fundamental division in world politics, between imperialism and communism. As I said, for a Marxist, used to epochal thinking, the Bolshevik revolution remains the pivot of this century's struggles. It began the world-historical transformation to socialism we're still within, it marked the clearest instance of connecting conscious class struggle to Marxism as a revolutionary theory. Prospects for socialism realistically will depend on the Soviet Union's economic and military might. But its Stalinist degeneration has also enormously limited socialism's advance — in the sacrifice of revolutionary principles to bureaucratic realpolitik, in the near-fatal confusion to Marxism's claims to unify revolutionary theory and practice, not least in the enormous ideological blockage of the anti-democratic nature of "existing" socialism.

The turn to glasnost in the Soviet Union over the last few years fundamentally alters the ideological character of the moment. The anti-communism of western bourgeois ideology is suddenly losing the public relations war with a newly attractive Soviet state. The tactical shift from imperial first-strike rhetoric to nuclear treaties indicates only a first glimmer of the potential importance. The ideological weight which has blocked strategic thinking for Marxists in the West for so long may be about to lighten. In the democratic awakening of Soviet politics — not least in the extraordinary public debate over Lenin, Bukharin, Trotsky and Stalin and their place in history — as it collides with the bureaucracy's anti-working class market reforms, we can see the possibility of the Soviet working class once again stepping onto the historical stage. Few events are more hopeful or important.

Every hope contains danger of a disappointment as well. Even if the working class within advanced capitalism is sometimes combative and sometimes supports parties nominally socialist, its leaders are largely business unionists, social democrats or Communists whose historic inability to lead transformative struggles has been proven over and over again. For all the exuberance of new mass struggles, for all the vitality of the resurgence of intellectual Marxism in the '60s and '70s, no new mass organizations of the left were built, no party was transformed. The social democrats and Communists did not neatly file into the dustbins of history.

The failure of linear revolutionary hopes has demoralized many of the leftists of my generation but it should not be seen as simply a "failure" of Marxism. The politics of social compromise offered by the parties of the old left have also failed even on their own terms, have rarely been so exposed as simply managing capitalism and the workers in the interests of capital, have rarely been so clearly part of the retreat from socialism, let alone Marxism. There may be new opportunities as these parties face strategic bankruptcy once more but that hardly forestalls the recycling of ossified timidity.

Similarly, I noted reason to celebrate the survival of the movements of the '60s, despite the media obituaries, but these have also failed to remotely threaten capitalism as a system, to produce a comprehensive radicalism or even to move towards socialism in any fashion. Their ideological and organizational trajectories are more characteristically into liberal state reformism, if not diffusion or collapse (with crucial exceptions such as the socialist and unionist feminists). The limitation of political horizons here has doubtless also led to the disillusionment with politics expressed in much of current academia. Again, we might have hoped for a more explosive and linear radicalization. However, those theorists who counterpose these movements to the traditional definitions of socialism centred on the proletariat are on very weak ground if this is their radical hope. Even the most battered of working classes organizationally dwarf such movements. The movements should not be dismissed — they contain enormous resources of opposition — or be counterposed to class opposition, because, rather than isolated from class, they express the complexity and density of social oppression across but not totally defined by class. Any vital socialism will contain their combative plurality and overcome their isolation.

Just as clearly, the liberal Stalinists of the Soviet Union may open up new vistas for socialism even while they may prostrate themselves before imperial might, may collude with the roll back of revolutionary gains in Angola or Afghanistan, threaten existing socialism with elements of capitalist restoration, unleash reserves of reactionary nationalism in Eastern Europe or within the Soviet Union, open up socialism to re-penetration by Western capital. The new ideological atmosphere of "detente" has also been recast in the Western media as an opportunity to celebrate the Market, Democracy or Human Rights in the crude and inane way for which the years of Thatcher and Reagan have prepared us.

Nonetheless, if we take the American case as paradigmatic of the conjuncture, we can see the potential for optimistic resistance and follow the ebbing of Reaganism as a coherent, triumphal "movement" since the Iran-Contra Scandal. Reaganism has failed to fully enact its more brutal social agenda; the support for, and the institutional weight of, the welfare state have tempered some of the virulence of class re-structuring. The appearance of mainstream, if bourgeois, opposition to the bi-partisan class strategies is crucial; Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition have shown some of the organizational and ideological resilience in the working class and movements of America. The imperial warriors have stalled in their Nicaraguan adventure, tactically discovered Human Rights Abuses in dictatorships subsidized for decades, emphasized managed "democracy" over arms in Haiti or the Philippines. Not least, they have shifted the bellicosity of first-strike threats to partial detente with the Soviet Union. The conjuncture offers signs of political opening, even hope.

## THE CRISIS OF MARXISM

This prospectus is no reason for dewy optimism, but it should form a context for committed criticism. The crisis of capitalism expresses itself globally, its local permutations are parts of a comprehensible social totality anchored and directed by class relations. Understanding the character and strength of opposition requires this comprehension. That resistance in the world has allowed the connection between revolutionary theory and mass struggle to remain a visible hope; '68 was only a start. Such a resolution would resolve the "crisis" of Marxism announced by disillusioned radicals in the wake of disappointed hopes through the '70s. But the best of Marxism has always seen itself as requiring recreation, re-thinking itself historically. Like many others I see that process of theoretical and political renewal especially evoked by the revolutionary years which produced the Bolshevik Revolution, the Spartacist rising, the Turin councils. The theory and politics of Luxembourg, Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, Lukacs allowed a break with the determinism and reformism of a sclerotic Social Democracy, prepared for actual revolution and retained the ability to dissect what went wrong as Stalinism gripped Marxism, not only in its terror but once again in dogma and reformist passivity. Our conjuncture, as much as any other, can be better understood through the strategic debates on class struggle, soviets, parties, mass strikes, imperialism and nationalism, the popular front and, of course, culture . . . Political thinking without this tradition suffers, in the superficial sense, from the repetition of liberal and radical illusions; but also in the more profound sense from strategic confusions and disasters — the loss of the opportunities throughout Europe in the '60s and '70s, the debacle of the Iranian revolution, the confusion and despair over Poland and Afghanistan, the partial impotence in the face of capitalist offensives, the repetition of popular front delusions throughout left thinking, even continentally, the failure of much of the American Left to think themselves out of the Democratic Party or the Canadian Left to think themselves out from under bourgeois nationalism. The moment and organization of new revolutionary interventions are hardly clear, so invoking the tradition is partly emblematic, but it is certain that new battles and opportunities are emerging around us.

The new opportunities of the '60s and '70s have partly revived the revolutionary tradition within Marxism. The outpouring of new Marxist political and economic analysis since the early '70s has been enormous — Mandel, Braverman, Aglietta, Wright, Miliband, Therborn, Poulantzas, Cohen, Thompson, Anderson. The philosophical and political basis of classic Marxism has been re-stated and developed. But the clear connection between theory and mass politics is still disappointing and uneven. In this context, the Battle of Ideas against Marxism by post structuralism has taken on exaggerated significance. I am unequivocally on the side of Marxism in such a battle; materialism against idealist discursivity, the praxis of labour and production against the inflation of Language, social totality centred on class and dialectical conflict and revolutionary transformation in history against its dissolution, decentring or randomness, collective agency and imaginative consciousness against the dead or subjected subject. Similarly the political challenges offered by various epigones of post structuralism — the choosing of America and Reaganism, the eviction of the proletariat from history for failing to meet precise deadlines for the revolution, the discovery of the libertine, the Bohemian,

the schizophrenic as the corrective for the dead subject, guerilla semiotics, mute surrender to the hyper-real fluidity of the media, etc. are hardly serious riposte to Marxism's commitment to socialism. (It is much more incumbent on those who would rescue a Leftist position from within these grotesqueries to explain themselves.)

However, it would be erroneous to think this battle can be won by intellectual sloganeering. Marxism's failings have also produced the debate — in Stalinism's betrayals, in the cultural despair of the Frankfurt School, in potential for determinist interpretation of its key formulations. While the binary oppositions rigidly espoused by some post structuralists are myopic, it would be wrong to deny that Marxism has suffered from mechanical materialism or linearized History; the debate should also clarify what is recoverable and progressive in Marxism itself. Indeed, the confrontation with structuralism produced real gains in the analysis of the state, class, ideology and culture, sometimes in broadening ossified categories, sometimes in contesting those claims. It is also a political fact of the post-68 period that radicals should be dissatisfied with the Marxism offered by Old, New and Far Left. Marxism has partly neglected issues of gender, race, sexuality, ecology, democracy, organization, culture itself — and the emergence of the movements around these contradictions does demand that Marxists re-think strategy in an altered terrain of opposition to capitalism. I am confident that Marxism can contain and strengthen such opposition because it has a history of engagement with the multiple determinations of change and revolution. There should be common ground with post structuralists also committed to broadening opposition. More pessimistically, the most coherent post structuralist polemicists — Aronowitz, Laclau and Mouffe — fall into crude red-baiting, pose movements against class, as if lottery-like we choose one or the other, and offer strategies debated and discredited for decades — the popular front, Bernstein's revisionism, new democracy. Nonetheless, capitalism's presentation as repressive, exploitative and class dominated could hardly be clearer; a debate over the character and strategy of opposition should be welcome.<sup>1</sup>

## MARXISM AND CULTURE

Art and class struggle, what should be done? Given political clarity, a viable socialist politics should be a pre-condition for viable cultural criticism . . . I want to set out some of the programmatic contours of a Marxist criticism.

Most Marxists have been lavishly clear that socialism could not be built without basing itself industrially, technologically, and culturally upon capitalism's achievements. There is no horizon of liberation without that.<sup>2</sup> Dominant culture needs constant analysis and investigation, it offers an enormous repository of criticism, contradiction, opposition and resistance to its own class reality. If we could not discover myriad levels of "the progressive" in culture, in "civil society," variously political in coherence, we would all surely give up. Bourgeois culture can be perceived as an achievement of humanity not one class.

Mostly this importance to culture is invested with the aesthetic, in the repetitive faith of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Adorno or Marcuse in great art. Partly this tradition can be invoked to remind us that we can love art, can revel in the sensuous experience against the ascetic and suspicious attacks on art and representation which have been prominent in some cultural criticism. This obviously can be seen as idealist in an admirable sense, but it opens up the investiga-

tion of pleasure in art, largely confined recently to grim Lacanian detours of desire, and the collective and formal pleasures we all enjoy in all the media and entertainments around us. This merely sets an agenda but it is worth noting that the notorious resistance of these forms to precise measures of political, ideological or even market effectivity at least opens them up for different uses.

Marxism's celebration of art has always been particularly concentrated upon the realist novel, as the particular artistic achievement of rising capitalism. Materialist epistemology has sometimes crudely championed art which produces an acutely knowledgeable reflection of social reality. But this is also based upon an ability to see the novel's form and style producing a transformation of that reality's contradictions into its own harmonious structure, more a mode of investigation than a mirror. Thus, Marxism's comprehension of history's dramatic patterns of contradiction and transformation privileges the narrative form, realized most influentially and lastingly in the novel (restated recently by Jameson). The novel was seen to offer a critique beyond the ideological demands of ruling ideas and class, *the* example of superstructural effectivity. Though marred by an excess of stylistic prescription or conservative insistence on 19th century models of realism, Marxist aesthetics still places a primary focus on narrative and the artistic confrontation with reality. This needn't be seen as exhaustive or prescriptive in all situations. Realism is not an essence of harmony and knowledge against which modernism's essence of disruption and fragmentation is programmed to lose. Nor should the inverse be any more attractive. Indeed this century's art is marked by a combination and overlap of these supposed artistic opposites (i.e., Brecht and Lukacs are both partly right in the famous debates).

In contemporary terms, our attention will clearly be drawn to the ubiquity of narrative forms throughout the popular culture and mass media of advanced capitalism. This has often provoked an equally powerful suspicion of art. Culture is not just glorious works which display the wondrous relative autonomy of the superstructure but it is also part of material production, circumscribed by ruling ideologies, imbedded in the state and the corporation and the commodity. Marxists have not generally understood the disruptions to traditional culture caused by technological and corporate organization much better than bourgeois critics. Their suspicion can ally with the glorification of lost culture, with the obsessed condemnation of the commodity form and its degraded audiences — that lead to the Frankfurt School's impasse. As we know, this is a diatribe that still attracts equally offended adherents, but since the imbrication of commodity and art are historically constitutive of even the greatest of bourgeois art, it is difficult to assign exact political or explanatory purchase. But it forms part of the ideological critique of popular art which dominates much of contemporary cultural criticism. Indeed Althusser can be seen as the culmination of Western Marxism's pessimistic inflation of the power of ideology and culture to maintain class rule; the interpellated subject and the Ideological State Apparatuses updating the authoritarian personality, cultural industries and administered capitalism.

Film studies has been marked by an extreme version of this charge — the fixing of the spectator by form, the inherent ideological nature of form and technology popularized by Cahiers' famous categories, McCabe's Classic Realism and Mulvey's attack on visual pleasure. The crudity of the formulae — their brutal reversal of Marxism's reverence for narrative and realism, the casual and ignorant dismissal of that

tradition, the apparent contempt for the masses — still needs to be challenged. But, surprisingly enough, the critical effect of these new “scientific” concepts was to produce and provoke work which has seriously investigated the levels of contestation and contradiction in the apparently dismissed popular forms (rather like supposedly outmoded explanations based on author or genre). Much less successful has been the attempt to prescribe the consequences for radical practice — in Godard’s counter-cinema, Theory films, neo-narratives. Formal characteristics such as self-referentiality or intertextuality which could be discovered as readily in the respectable High Modernism of post-war corporate art were given an essentialized political cachet. Radicals found themselves championing an avant-garde whose political coalescence was provisional at best. Not surprisingly that film criticism has fallen back on an increasingly hermetic formal and ideological investigation of Hollywood, where it amiably overlaps with older liberal and humanist efforts.

Radical critical intervention will benefit enormously from a loosening of ideology’s iron grip on art; not all art serves class ideology in the same way, nor does art produce a mechanically dominated subject, or a rigidly singular reception; art’s meanings are often pragmatic and specific to a volatile conjuncture, not just read off a pre-ordained machine for dominant ideology. This should be a perhaps paradoxical corollary of our awareness of the opposition capitalism constantly engenders and of the importance of conscious organized politics. The politics of the left can not and should not hope to encompass all art and culture. Fortunately, the politics of the bourgeoisie can not do so either. Capitalist art has functions which are potentially contradictory, to please and to profit, to awake desires which may not be answerable, to disrupt and reinforce ideology; that is why its realm so attracts us all.

Unfortunately, the crudity of the post-’68 efforts has slowed or discredited the aim of radical practice. However misguided, the radicalized critics were responding to a continuing failure in Marxist aesthetics — the conservative tendency to trail bourgeois aesthetics, the simple condemnation of commodity art. But in a revolutionary epoch Marxists also wanted an aesthetic of intervention. Partly, this recognized that capitalist culture in its diversity and ideological heterogeneity was part of the strength of Western capitalism. Faith in great art’s political significance may have a certain epochal truth in relation to cultural change but it is understandably hard to maintain within active politics. The time frame of politics is punctual and specific and demands a more pragmatic concern with effectivity. Brecht was right in his crude comment that we need to get something out of art. In a sense, this represents a switch in time frames; cultural change in a gradual sense is crucial to socialism but some culture can be a specific part of the struggle; we can move from analysis and contemplation to prescription and effectivity, from dominant to oppositional culture. The dilemma has been that Marxists have tried to define *the* revolutionary essence of art and apply it everywhere as a measure of greatness — often exactly duplicating great traditions and surrendering the political (Marcuse) or inventing traditions and dictating the political (Zhadnov). But perhaps if we abandon the search for revolutionary essence we can maintain something of the two senses of culture. However, respectful of culture, it is also inevitable that Marxist politics, with its profound sense of rupture and violent discontinuity, of the negation of capitalism as well as its subsumption, will demand a political role for some art.

The Bolsheviks in the ’20s sometimes managed to straddle

these two time frames. Lenin and Trotsky argued that cultural power — as knowledge, technique, sensibility — could not be seized with the punctuality of political power, but that it was at least as crucial to the building of a new society as the millenarian claims of the various avant-gardes. At the same time, they were not averse to organizing Party art for myriad specific tasks. Despite Stalinism’s claim to fix the issue by dictatorial fiat, the art connected to the revolution, and later to the Popular Front, is still lastingly important to any Marxist aesthetic — Eisenstein, Dovshenko, Mayakovsky, Brecht, Vertov, Renoir, Ivens, Piscator still reverberate with political vitality and formal inventiveness.

Every revolution this century has been combined with vast cultural changes, often uneasily allied with politics. For us, in decidedly pre-revolutionary North America, Gramsci’s advocacy of a war of hegemonic position within civil society most clearly advocates a political strategy imbedded in an all-rounded oppositional culture and most clearly appreciates the enormous cultural and political strength of advanced capitalism. No successful class politics has been built anywhere without some sense of building an oppositional culture; ours will be no different. In the unions, in the movements of the ’60s and ’70s and ’80s, even in their less obviously politicized remnants — food co-ops, music sub-cultures, psychotherapy — we have something of the forms and consciousness that will be necessary. We should not underestimate the political convulsions and conflicts which will be required to move from the complacent status of “alternative” to the real struggle for power, but the critic may take a modest place as an organic intellectual in that process.

## CINEACTION?

Alongside achievement of some political functions, the limitations of *CineAction!* are, first, that it situates itself too politely within acceptable academic discourses and second, that as a collective it rarely organizes its intervention around agreed political issues and concerns, beyond a broad orientation to progressive politics. Politics should be the commanding direction and our model would be better drawn from serious leftist journalism than the academic world. Our critical focus may often begin with the formal worlds of film but our “institutional” connection should be to the manifest struggles in the social world. Our individual model should not be the critical disembodied intellectual of the liberal university’s ideal, obviously not the craven “prize fighters for the bourgeoisie” and its state who largely people the existing university, but the militant and collective intellectual figured in organizations of active politics.

Our criticism should operate across the terrains of dominant and popular culture. There is much in popular culture and the mass media that is valuable aesthetically and ideologically, much we need to know about the forms available for politics. I assume we agree that it is filled with contradictory and progressive meanings and values — great reservoirs of pre-political, imaginative and critical rebelliousness, of inestimable value to oppositional politics and culture.

But we, despite defending it against the theorists of monolithic capitalism, can also recognize that the culture of huge corporations is only relatively autonomous, that it serves class interests in powerful and often blatantly conscious and affirmative ways, that its “radicalism” is circumscribed in its form as entertainment and commodity, that the spectator, if not fixed, is limited in the role of cinema audience. When we shift to criticism within oppositional culture our definition of audience will be more political than cinematic. This shift may

also require different aesthetic criterion, emphasize more cohesively expressed values and ideologies, pay more attention to political "use-value." Clearly there is overlap; some mainstream films achieve political coherence, much of popular culture we experience partly out of the absolute corporate control of the mass media; most, but not all, radical cultural practice will appropriate and contest popular forms, fashion narratives and try to explosively relate to social reality. While this means a more tolerant restoration of realism to political use compared to some film theory, it is important to realize that leftist activism never left it. Despite banishment outside serious film theory's Hollywood fixation, the tradition of the partisan documentary and its fictional close relatives remains a central contribution to committed art; if class struggle is effaced or reviled or allegorical in dominant culture, at least here, it has a history of representation. (We should, however, avoid embalming a specific realist style as generically definitive for radical culture.)<sup>3</sup>

To take an obvious example, John Sayles' recent film, *Matewan*, is a modestly successful attempt to combine oppositional practice with mainstream popular cinema. It relates directly and emotionally to a left public using stylistic conventions from the committed documentary tradition, Hollywood social realism and the Western, which do not limit the engagement of a broader audience. Politically, its representation of history celebrates class militance in the West Virginia coalfields of the '20s, while addressing issues of race, ethnicity, gender, community culture and organization: New Left

reacquaints with Old. Economically, the film moves in the space opened up for independent production by the uncertainties of blockbuster mega-projects in recent Hollywood. Its political purchase depends upon the continuing importance of violent and symbolic class battles in contemporary capitalism and upon the greater space for liberal and left-liberal cinema in the post-Iran/Contra scandal faltering of Reaganism.

As well the left must have a special interest in all work made against the dominant media, whether that against is defined by class, nation, region, gender, race, sexuality, individuality or aesthetic form itself. Much of this terrain comprises popular culture outside the control of the mass media and the promotion and encouragement of its political coherence is a crucial task. Much of it is already connected to oppositional culture. Much of it is experimental or avant-garde work which, even if we doubt its political relevance, should not be a priori punished for Peter Wollen's or Jean-Luc Godard's sins. Art doesn't necessarily contain the correct balanced analysis of the dominant forms and their subtler virtues; it is ideological and partial because it may be angry and oppositional. For instance, Vertov and other socialist documentarists were famously dismissive of fiction and its pleasures, that hardly invalidates their work; indeed the model they offer of engagement with popular form and stylistic synthesis of modernism and realism is clearly exemplary. Hostility to Hollywood can also contain a healthy radicalism, not just the elitism of the jaded academic. While



James Earl Jones in John Sayles' *Matewan*.

there is unlikely to be a perfect fit between artistic and political vanguards, that does not rule out some relationship.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, radical culture, we can confidently predict, will be influenced by centuries of artistic ferment — Romanticism, Gothic, Dadaism, Surrealism, Expressionism, multiple Hollywood and TV genres, continuing technological innovations and disruptions . . .

## CONCLUSIONS? EVERY CRITICISM A THREAT

"Every one of his criticisms contains a threat."

— Brecht, *Against Lukacs*

No moment of history is either empty or innocent; every moment lost to capitalism's brutal progress contains the essence of its violent negation by capital's own irrational self-propulsion, by the contradictory securing of new grounds of domination and emancipation. We begin with class politics to attempt to ensure liberation triumphs. But it is impossible to ever fit culture and politics cohesively, to take the temperature and determine the precise decline of the bourgeoisie — minimally, the last century should direct attention to that class's refusal to ripen, rot and fall off the historical tree when informed of the banality or destructiveness of its culture. But the effort to find in art an image of ending pre-History, of liberating and aestheticizing life may help us build culture and politics together. All the "humanist" shibboleths might come true, for they are the best of us could say. But the bourgeoisie, whose culture we often praise, might take humanity through any barbarism to preserve its class rule and the oppressed and exploited, overturning that domination, in their festivals of revolt, might rip down the museums and theatres, slit all the throats of the contemplative and the beautiful. It all depends on how well we can think both the chronologies of culture and politics at once. "History hurts" and we need to clearly understand the bloodthirstiness of the enemy and the struggle against that enemy. So we criticize cinema and encourage a cinema of opposition and maybe, thinking again of Brecht and Lukacs,

every criticism *should* contain a threat, not against art, but against our ruling classes. □

## NOTES

1. See particularly Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, London: Verso, 1983; Alex Callinicos, *Is There A Future For Marxism?*, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1982; Terry Eagleton, "Marxism, Structuralism and Post Structuralism," *Diacritics*, Winter, 1985.
2. The heroic efforts of revolutions in the colonial world have overturned the strict linearity of this view because the combined and uneven development of capitalism produced unexpected opportunities. However, international prospects for global communism must rest upon this material determination. Significantly, in this confusing process, the allure of pure voluntarism which French intellectuals placed upon Maoism has produced the most bitter intellectual renegades from socialism.
3. It should be clear that many of these emphases and arguments are shared with the editorial mini-manifesto by Britton, Jacobowitz, Lippe and Wood in *CineAction!* 13/14. However, I am more than uneasy with the invocation of a courageous Leavisite defense of Tradition and Culture against demonic Theorist/Philistines and with the factionally parochial aim to transplant *Movie* for the mission. The direction offered is, despite the boldness of tone, the academic fixation on Hollywood fiction characteristic of any film department, with the close criticism that has been academic orthodoxy for decades. The appeal to the public would seem to be one defined, in the issue's articles, by the students in advanced courses on classic genres. As important as teaching is, might not a politics of pedagogy leave us huddling around the faint glow of the liberal university till such utopianism turns to moralism? Indeed, the dismissal of all other left criticism is decidedly sectarian and self-congratulatory. Clearly, my editorial colleagues wish to connect their critical focus to political practice, but I am concerned that the space offered for cultural production politically and formally outside Hollywood fiction is uncomfortably like the bare tolerance industry and academy already offer. Dominant culture and oppositional practice should both be of "primary" concern to radicals — or the balance should be open to strategic and political argument, rather than tautologically defined by the Greatness of art. If it's true that the post-structuralists set sail for China only to land in California, I'm worried that some of us might not want to leave Hollywood at all.
4. Perry Anderson, in "Modernity and Revolution," *New Left Review*, emphasized the highly specific conditions in which artistic avant-gardes aligned with revolution in the '20s; the respectable institutionalization of modernism into official culture since the '40s is one crucial subsequent change.

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# The Philosophy of The Pigeonhole:

## WISCONSIN FORMALISM AND "THE CLASSICAL STYLE"

by Andrew Britton

THE following is an extract from a forthcoming book entitled *Reading Hollywood*, and it is offered here as an essay on critical method. The nature of my assumptions will be clear enough from the essay itself, but it will be as well, perhaps, to begin with a brief statement of principle. I assume, firstly, that all works of art represent an intervention in a culture and that interpretation is a process of defining what the nature of that intervention is. I also assume that the aim of interpretation is to arrive at a judgment of the value of the work. Cultural analysis divorced from an explicit evaluative project leads at best to the accumulation of data which have a potential critical usefulness, and at worst to the rationalisation, as objective truth, of an evaluative project which is never presented as such. Evaluation without cultural analysis leads at best to the expression of intelligent opinions and at worst to "I like it because I like it." The critic should aim, to begin with, to understand what Gerard Manley Hopkins called "the sakes" of the work — what do its makers think of the work as being? what do they want to do? what is the significance of their wanting to do this? — proceeding then to an account of what the work does, which may well be very different from anything grasped by its project. This inquiry is already implicitly evaluative: the critic writes from a point of view, which ought to be as conscious and as explicit as possible. It should also be relevant — and the only test of its relevance is the work, which is not something simply available to be constituted at will by the discourse of criticism but an historical

object to which criticism aspires to be adequate. It follows that the critic should read without inappropriate bias. We cannot properly object to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for example, because we think that Bunyan's theology is false: it is not a valid criticism of a work that it disagrees with the critic. What we judge is the work itself as the material form of a sensibility defined by, and addressing itself to, a culture; and we derive our sense of this form from an analysis of the work both as historical project and realised meaning. Interpretation and evaluation are, in any case, continuous with each other: interpretation necessarily implies, and appeals for the reader's assent to, a judgment. The critic should be aware of this fact, and should write accordingly as a person judging in the present, from a given position, that such and such a work is or is not significant and valuable for what s/he takes to be creative cultural life now. The critical enterprise, in other words, is intrinsically — and should be frankly — political. There can be no impartial discourse, and if the reader does not know where the critic stands in relation to the work s/he has no means of defining or assessing the critic's judgments — which may, of course, be found seriously to misrepresent the work. The generalised point will be seen to have its relevance for the case I discuss below, which seems to me to represent in an extreme form the two most serious of all critical errors: indifference to the concrete historical particularity of works of art and the subordination of interpretation to judgments of value, derived from *idées reçues*, which precede the act of analysis.

"It is . . . evident that the interrelationships between stylistic procedures are best discovered when one of them is used in particularly outrageous fashion, provoking a reaction in others. That is why the extreme cases give more information than the average. At any rate, the average cannot give one the range of a style — only the extremes can do that, and they alone can endow the average with its true sense. We may say that the extremes give the outline of the style, and the average gives its center of gravity. A middle-point has no significance until we know what it stands between."

— Charles Rosen, "The Ruins of Walter Benjamin":  
On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Reflections,  
ed. Gary Smith (MIT Press, US 1988: p. 163)

*The Classical Hollywood Cinema* by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson<sup>1</sup> is the first serious attempt in the history of film criticism to challenge that division of labour between theory and historical scholarship which has been so persistent, characteristic and unhelpful a feature of Hollywood studies. The magnitude of the authors' ambition is given in their sub-title: "Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960." They offer to define the nature of "a distinct and homogeneous style (which) has dominated American studio filmmaking" between 1917 and 1960 — "a style whose principles remain quite constant across decades, genres, studios, and personnel" (p. 3); and to demonstrate, further, that every aspect of this style was determined by the Hollywood cinema's "dependence upon a specific economic mode of film production and consumption" (p. 6). This is a very large offer indeed, and it is no doubt the book's daunting art of appearing to account for everything which has inhibited the widespread argument and controversy one would naturally expect to follow from the publication of a work advancing claims of this kind. I say "naturally" because the claims seem to me to be, for all their plausibility, obviously false, and if the authors fail so largely to substantiate them that is because nothing of the kind could *be* substantiated: the project, as defined, is unrealisable.

In what follows, I am primarily concerned with the matter of "film style" and I have concentrated, accordingly, on the first of the book's seven parts, "The Classical Hollywood style, 1917-60." The contents page attributes this section to Mr. Bordwell alone, but since he regularly employs the first person plural, and since the function of Part One is to adumbrate the theoretical principles which structure the book as a whole, I have taken it for granted that, though he may not employ a uniform "group style," he speaks nevertheless in a group voice, and I have therefore, where necessary, attributed the particular form of the opinions he expresses to his collaborators as well as himself.

When I say that Part One is without question the worst part of the book, I should not be taken to mean that in later sections the standard of the criticism improves or that the theory applied to the films becomes less disastrously inappropriate. It is true to say, however, that my criticisms (which are entirely hostile) will be focussed on the one part of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* where the skills in which its authors' qualities manifest themselves most impressively are not called for: Part One is, from first word to last, pure, unmitigated Theory. The strictly scholarly parts of the book are on the whole very good, and had Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues confined themselves to the tasks which scholarship can properly attempt one would have been happy to recommend their work, without qualification, as an invaluable reference for all serious students of Hollywood movies. As things stand, however, the recommendation must be very severely qualified indeed, for the scholarship is attached to,

and serves in its context to rationalise, a critical discourse which is in every respect unacceptable and against which one is bound to protest. The authors tell us that the scholarship and the critical theory are interdependent, each illuminating, and drawing sustenance from, the other; but it is at least pleasant to report (the theory being what it is) that this is not the case. A divorce is very easily effected, and one can return with profit to the scholarly material even after one has decided that the accompanying attempt to theorise it may remain hereafter unread.

This is not to say that the scholarship should not be read with a critical eye: its limitations are summed up in the phrase "mode of production" in the book's title. Janet Staiger's descriptions of successive forms of management in the Hollywood film industry are useful and important, but they suffer (as Hollywood histories generally do) from the author's assumption that it is possible to extrapolate the object "Hollywood" from the social history of 20th century American capitalism as a whole. Ms. Staiger takes over the concept of "mode of production" from Marx, but she does not take over Marx's analytical method, and she treats "the Hollywood mode of production" and its development as if this mode were a thing in itself which can be studied independently of the culture within which the development took place. It is significant that on the one occasion when she sets out to remedy this omission, and discusses the implications for Hollywood studies of various attempts to theorise the logic both of monopoly and of advanced capitalism (pp. 314-17), she displays an economism which answers exactly to the formalism characteristic of the book's aesthetics. Momentarily, "Hollywood" is brought into contact with "mode of production" in the larger sense, but capitalism itself is construed as a purely economic structure rather than a structure of social relations, and the contact remains purely external. Ms. Staiger derives no more from her excursion through Hilferding, Mandel and Sweezy than "new methods for analyzing the film industry" (p. 316): the wider world is acknowledged to exist, but it only confirms the autonomy of the object which has been detached from it. Weak

This is, perhaps, predictable; and although we should be aware of the limitation, it does not detract from the interest of the data which Ms. Staiger assembles so cogently. The consequences of the authors' belief in a "distinct and homogeneous" classical style for their exposition of developments in film technology are very much more serious: here, again and again, the book's drastic critical/theoretical shortcomings intrude on the scholarship, to its detriment as scholarship. Consider, for example, Mr. Bordwell's account of deep focus cinematography (pp. 341-52). Naturally, the account entails an extensive discussion of the development of new kinds of lenses, arc lamps and film stock, and new techniques in the process of film developing, and Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues do this sort of thing very well. In circumstances such as these they are under no obligation to read or to judge, and they conduct the reader through material which might easily become dull in a lucid and lively manner. It is also an advantage of Mr. Bordwell's approach that he shows the reverse of a tendency to indulge the idea that deep-focus arrived with a bang in *Citizen Kane*, which he shows to have been, if not typical, yet exemplary of a contemporary preoccupation with the deepening of visual space. However, when the same approach leads Mr. Bordwell to write this —

"These innovations are not all that drastic. Within the context of the classical style, such depth devices were quickly assigned familiar functions." (p. 345)

— we begin to feel that he is demanding more of his method

than it can properly yield, and the feeling grows upon as we read through the analysis of the career of Gregg Toland which immediately follows. The career, as Mr. Bordwell renders it, is a familiar tale: the story of the innovative and adventurous "creative artist" who "developed too eccentric a style" which was subsequently "modified" (that is, as Mr. Bordwell makes plain, recuperated) "to fit classical norms" (pp. 348-49). It is taken for granted that the "too eccentric" style of *Citizen Kane* is Toland's, despite the fact that it has much more in common with the style of *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Touch of Evil* than it does with any of the films that Toland made without Welles; but I am less concerned here with questions of authorship (whichever way one looks at it, Toland's influence on *Kane* was decisive) than with the similarity between "the Gregg Toland story" narrated by Mr. Bordwell and "the Orson Welles story" narrated so often before. Mr. Bordwell admits, of course, that the style of *Citizen Kane*, apart from being "too eccentric," is also remarkably inflexible —

"The most famous deep-focus shots in the film . . . are notably rigid and posed, relying greatly upon frontality and narrowly circumscribed figure movement." (p. 347)

— and he illustrates the "new flexibility" of later works with the scene of Dana Andrews' phone-call from *The Best Years of Our Lives* which so pleased André Bazin; yet while "new flexibility" might seem to connote "greater expressiveness," Mr. Bordwell continues to refer to the development of deep-focus cinematography after *Kane* in negative and, at times, explicitly abusive terms:

"The ability to execute a shot in depth became one more mark of the expert cinematographer, but the wary professional chose not to call attention to deep focus by making it a personal trademark." (p. 352)

This vision of wary professional experts betraying, while also cashing in on (with what looks like conscious cynicism), the innovations of an "artist" who has rocked the classical boat is offered by Mr. Bordwell as a fact, though he brings forward nothing better in support of it than a review of *The Little Foxes* in *American Cinematographer* which complains that the depth of field makes the action difficult to follow and another review (from the same periodical) which praises Arthur Miller's "eloquent use of the modern increased-depth technique" in *How Green Was My Valley* for its avoidance of "the brittle artificiality which has so often accompanied the use" of deep focus (pp. 348-9). How we get from these reviews to the canny journeymen who prefer not to jeopardise their careers "by making deep focus a personal trademark" I do not know. It seems a long way: and one might begin by asking Mr. Bordwell whether, in his opinion, the cinematography of Stanley Cortez in *The Magnificent Ambersons* is to be thought of as falling mainly under the head of "wary professionalism" or that of "new flexibility." That an extended discussion of the use of deep focus in Hollywood should not even mention, once, a work which is by any reckoning central to the topic cannot but strike us as remarkable (especially as the film does turn up later on [p. 362] in the chapter on "widescreen processes and stereophonic sound"), though when we think about it the explanation is not hard to find. *Ambersons* is, by Mr. Bordwell's standard, a perfectly orthodox genre movie which could hardly fail to present itself to him as supremely exemplary of "the assimilation of deep focus to classical norms" (p. 351). He shrinks, however — for indefinable reasons — from suggesting that the film represents a judicious watering-down, by Stanley Cortez and

Orson Welles ("wary professionals" both), of the unorthodox formal audacities of Gregg Toland, and solves his dilemma by ignoring the existence of *The Magnificent Ambersons*.

Deep focus, in fact, is a pretty tough nut to crack from Mr. Bordwell's point of view. *Citizen Kane*, whatever we may think of it, is hardly notable for its conventionality and formal reticence, and yet it is a "classical Hollywood film" which plainly had a profound influence on other "classical Hollywood films"; the evidence, as Mr. Bordwell feelingly says, "seems to be baldly there on the screen" (p. 341). The scholar, therefore, must find a way of showing (a) that *Kane* was a deviant work by virtue of the obtrusiveness of its style; (b) that this style, on the other hand, was not *too* obtrusive to be absorbed by the "the classical paradigm," which was visibly changed; and (c) that despite this change nothing changed, for "the classical style promptly assigned the new techniques to already-canonized functions" (p. 339). In the light of this devious project Orson Welles becomes a major headache, since he went on to make several movies which labour under the triple disadvantage of being classical genre films, having exceptionally flamboyant and obtrusive "styles" and being artistically superior to *Citizen Kane*: but Gregg Toland recommends himself ideally as the stylistic freebooter who went too far and who, having (of course!) endowed the norms with "new flexibility," bowed to peer-pressure and went to work for William Wyler.

It turns out after all, then, that *Citizen Kane* has the conventional status for Mr. Bordwell that it has for everyone else, and it certainly does not occur to him to ask whether the phrase "brittle artificiality" does not point in the direction of a valid negative criticism of that film's visual "style." Of course, no one will argue that the phrase will do on its own: deep focus *does* have expressive functions in *Kane*, even if the functions are not very complex and even if the expressed is very often the *superbia* implicit in Welles's relation to his protagonist. "Brittle artificiality" is certainly the term, however, for the deep-focus compositions in *Ball of Fire*, which could hardly be more inert and academic, and if one hesitates to describe Toland as a "creative artist," for all his obvious brilliance, that is because the expressiveness of his photography is so intimately bound up with the dramatic context created for it by a particular director. Hawks, as we might expect, is not interested in deep focus one way or the other: the shots are there because Toland has prestige and is shooting the film, but they are patently un-Hawksian and Hawks neither protests against nor makes use of them; his interests lie elsewhere. The case is very different with Ford and Welles, and it is no slight to Toland to suggest that *The Grapes of Wrath* looks so unlike *Citizen Kane* because the compositional style and thematic preoccupations of John Ford are very unlike those of Orson Welles. It is even more important to insist that the "new flexibility" of post-*Kane* deep-focus cinematography was precisely that, and that "the assimilation of deep focus to classical norms" both transformed the norms and radically increased the expressive power of deep focus. It can be argued, indeed — as seems to be true, on Mr. Bordwell's own showing — that the "new flexibility" had already been achieved before *Citizen Kane* was made, and that *The Magnificent Ambersons* represents not a retreat into classical conventionality but a recognition of the artistic limitations of what Mr. Bordwell calls "the grotesquely monumental depth" of the earlier work (p. 345). The "eccentricity" and "obtrusiveness" of *Kane*'s style are not in themselves virtues, and while the assimilation of deep focus undoubtedly made it less eccentric, it did not necessarily make it less vis-

ible and striking, as a number of Mr. Bordwell's examples amply demonstrates (and of course, many more could be found). When depth of field *does* look eccentric and obtrusive, it also looks like Academy art — all the more incongruously in *Ball of Fire* because Hawks is as far from the Academy as an artist can reasonably be — and here, perhaps, we glimpse the logic which leads Toland to Wyler: a photographer who dreamed of "perfect(ing) an 'ultimate focus' lens that could stop down to f-64" (p. 351) might well end up, in practice, producing a film which "reeks of the oils" (in Byron's phrase) as strongly as *The Little Foxes* does.

The scholarship of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* is very often sustained by the kind of assumptions about "the classical style" which obtain here, and it is time now to turn to the first part of the book, where these assumptions are spelt out and thematised. There is a sense in which my epigraph from Charles Rosen's splendid essay on Walter Benjamin, pertinent as it is to the case in hand, also misrepresents it by conceding too much to the method of Mr. Bordwell and his collaborators. The "extreme cases" may well give us "more information than the average," but it is not with the average that Mr. Bordwell is in fact concerned. What he gives us is the lowest common denominator, which he then construes not merely as the average itself but as the type of the extreme cases as well.

One's doubts begin at once, on the very first page, where Mr. Bordwell proposes "the concept of group style" and goes on to suggest that "group styles" are to be thought of as sets of rules or norms which artists know and which they then proceed to obey or apply in their work. There is a certain sense, of course, in which this is perfectly true. Jacobean dramatists knew of the existence of a "rule" which stipulated that plays should be written in blank verse and which circumscribed by convention the occasions on which the dramatist might legitimately write in prose or use a metrical unit other than the unrhymed 10-syllable line, and Shakespeare, Jonson, and Middleton accordingly refrained from composing plays in couplets or terza rima. It is hardly possible to feel, however, that they understood the group style which they undoubtedly employed in this external and mechanistic kind of way. The whole point about group styles is that they are perceived by artists and their audiences as a significant means of articulating common social experience: the "rules" become rules because they conduce in some way to the exploration of a range of important, and widely shared, assumptions, feelings and attitudes. This would seem to suggest that such rules leave, and are acknowledged to leave, very considerable leeway and that they are present to those who submit to them less as constraints than as enabling possibilities: and indeed, when we examine the history of any given group style we invariably discover that when the sense of constraint becomes paramount, the style begins both to ossify and to generate substantial cultural opposition.

It goes without saying that group styles are historically specific and that they exist in part as a set of formal limits, but we need to be very scrupulous in our definition of what this commonplace *means*. Haydn did not wish to write, and could not conceivably have written, either the *Vespro della Beata Vergine* or *Pierrot Lunaire*, and it may well seem, from the point of view of late 20th century sophistication, that this fact is obviously to be explained in terms of Haydn's "obedience to the rules" of the classical symphony. In fact, Haydn was not following rules at all: he was exploring the possibilities of a culturally significant artistic form, and his work was, and had the effect of being, a development and reinvention of the "norms" from which he started (and which, of course, he

played a certain part in inventing in the first place). This work, and its effect, was possible precisely because the norms were continuous with his sensibility, and that working within (or, better, *with*) them allowed him to give material embodiment to that sensibility and to examine its nature and conditions. This sensibility was in no sense private: Haydn was not using a "group style" to express "himself." Artistic norms are cultural norms, and the deployment of them cannot be identified in any simple way with a process of individuation or "self-expression" (for all that this unfashionable idea seems to me to remain important in the discussion of art). To work *with* such norms is to work *on* and, in the major cases, to modify and change the terms of a public discourse which structures sensibility and which governs the ways in which art is able to signify, and engage with, the existing social world. No artist who impresses us as having major distinction relates to the norms of an artistic practice as structures external to him or herself which are there to be appropriated and "applied," and when we come across a work in which it is apparent that the artist *is* working in a spirit of obedience to rules that have to be followed, we know that a negative judgment will sooner or later be called for.

In that they *are* social norms, the norms of an art are not "formal" in any sense of that word which is congenial to a formalist, but it does not follow from their determinate social existence that they therefore embody, absolutely and monolithically, the dominant value-system of the culture which produced them. Their provenance can and must be referred to that value-system, but they no more "reflect" or "express" it than, in any given case, they merely reflect or express the consciousness of the artist who happens to be using them, and all highly conventionalised group styles are remarkable for the way in which many of the artists who use them find ways of placing and challenging the values implicit in the norms, even when these values are, in the culture as a whole, very strictly policed and enforced. This fact is often overlooked, especially by cultural scholarship. It was argued for years, for example, that English Renaissance drama promulgated something called "the Elizabethan/Jacobean world-view," and that Shakespeare's tragedies (which were, after all, performed at, and partly sponsored by, the English court) were dedicated to exposing the disastrous consequences of tampering with a "natural" order guaranteed by, and dependent on, the sacred institutions of kingship. Many of the conventions of English Renaissance tragedy do indeed answer to such a description, but the majority of the plays written within those conventions do not. The status of artistic norms is extremely complex, and while they are not available for use in any way that the artist thinks fit, and may be said to foreclose the possibility of certain kinds of utterance completely, they do not necessarily exact a discourse which reproduces the values that they themselves embody.

The authors of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* admit, of course, that the group style which they deduce from Hollywood movies allows of various kinds of formal choice and "offers a *range* of alternatives" (p. 5) to actual film-makers, but it is not too much to say that, in their description of the nature of these choices, they take it for granted that the films were made in the same spirit in which they offer to read them, with a like disregard for, and innocence of, all those aspects of artistic production which are designated by the concept of "expression." A subject, for whatever reason, suggests itself, and it is then structured according to the known principles of "classical narration": that is the basic argument. Logically enough, the habitual formalism of Hollywood's *artists* is answered by, and can be seen to conduce to, a formalist

disposition on the part of the audience. Mr. Bordwell argues, to his credit, that what he calls the "illusionist" theory of narrative, which posits a spectator who is passively "constructed" by the classical text, is obviously unacceptable, and that Hollywood movies solicit an activity of reading from their audience, yet this activity — as he conceives it — amounts to little more than the learning and decipherment of the "schemata" in terms of which (we are to believe) the film was structured to begin with. Mr. Bordwell imagines that Hollywood's audiences consist of a series of miniature clones of himself, and although we might feel tempted to conclude, at first glance, that this vision is less infelicitous than that to which we have been accustomed by decades of Critical Theory, it turns out, in no very long run, that "miniature" is decidedly the operative word: the activities "called forth" by the classical film are "highly standardized and comparatively easy to learn" (p. 7). For all their imputed "activity," Mr. Bordwell's spectators are in no better a position than *Screen's* or Adorno's to appreciate the superior virtue of the avant-garde.

This virtue being in question, it is time to point out, perhaps, that the particular concept of "group style" to which Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues commit themselves (and which I, for the purposes of argument, have taken up from them) is utterly unintelligible. It is the implicitly — more often than not, explicitly — pejorative counterpart of the "unique internal stylistic norms" which Mr. Bordwell discovers "in the work of Dreyer, Bresson, Mizoguchi, Straub/Huillet, Ozu, Resnais and Godard" (a concatenation of names which, I would say, already portends a serious failure of critical thought) and for the greater glory of which (he supposes) he has concocted his grotesque parody of Hollywood's "classicism." The paradoxical nature of the idea of a "unique norm" (p. 81) should be enough to warn us against it: there is not, never has been and never will be a work of art whose "style" derives from norms which are unique and internal to itself, and there has not been and cannot be a "group style" of the kind postulated in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. All styles are "group styles": that is to say, the style of any given artist is a more or less complex, adventurous and idiosyncratic inflection of conventional cultural materials which, by definition, precede, and create the conditions for, the artist's work. Mr. Bordwell would like to believe otherwise, but he can only contrive to do so by inflating his norms and schemata into "a distinct and homogeneous" stylistic system in some cases (p. 3) and completely ignoring their existence in others. His work on Ozu and Dreyer — and Ms. Thompson's on Eisenstein — is very notably *not* characterised by its preoccupation with the traditions, conventions and cultural circumstances within which these artists produced their films, and one might be forgiven if one failed to realise, from Mr. Bordwell's account, that Ozu was a commercial, genre film-maker, and that he (and Mizoguchi) flourished under "conditions of production" which were in some ways very similar to Hollywood's. I agree with Mr. Bordwell that Ozu's "style" is "unique" — and it is rather different from Hitchcock's; but it is no more *sui generis* than Hitchcock's (or any significant Hollywood director's) is "an 'unstable equilibrium' of classical norms" (p. 5). When he is talking about Hollywood, Mr. Bordwell insists (in his way) on norms, modes of production and the "bounds of difference" (p. 70), and inveighs against "the individualist emphases of auteur criticism" (p. 4); but when he is talking about Ozu, he insists only on what he imagines (wrongly) to be the absolute distinctions between Ozu's procedures and the monolithic "classical style" he has himself constructed.

The pioneering earnestness, and the single-minded disingenuousness, with which the authors of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* set about the joyless and laborious task of building their "model of the ordinary film" (p. 10) are staggering; and it cannot but strike us as inevitable that their "formalist approach", co-existing as it does with their foreknowledge of the conclusions they are going to reach, should lead them to take the "unprecedented" step (their own word) of applying "the practice of unbiased sampling" to the "stylistic analysis of the cinema" (p. 10). If this step is indeed "unprecedented" (as I gladly suppose it to be), that is perhaps because it has seemed to earlier critics that the practice is so obviously inappropriate, and the "findings" it is likely to yield are so obviously fatuous, that they have preferred not to run the risk of having their names associated with a precedent of the kind, and it seems to me to be a telling symptom of the fundamentally primitive character of contemporary film theory (the primitiveness being perfectly compatible with — indeed, portentous of — the sophistication) that Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues did not at once eschew this innovation as soon as the thought of it had occurred to them. What serious literary critic, undertaking a theoretical study of the 19th century bourgeois novel, would proceed on the basis of an "unbiased sample" which might or might not include examples of the work of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Eliot, Stendhal, Flaubert, Hawthorne, Melville, Tolstoy or James, but which might very well be dominated by the collected works of Charlotte Yonge, Bulwer Lytton and Captain Maryatt? — and what information about the 19th century bourgeois novel would such an undertaking, persisted in, be likely to provide? We would certainly discover (as we might, and ought, to have known) that there are large numbers of inferior 19th century novels of varying degrees of documentary interest, but we would learn less than nothing about the novel as a form — for the simple reason that the *kind* of interest which the inferior works have is only comprehensible in the context of the incomparable artistic achievement excluded by the intrinsic bias of the unbiased sample. The idea that there is an ideal "normal," "typical" or "representative" film which could be constituted by this or any method is illusory; and it is equally an illusion to suppose that what the unbiased sample gives us is the normal work — as Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues, even if their critical sense did not alert them, might readily have deduced from the functions of unbiased sampling in that kind of bourgeois sociology which originated the method. The work of art which is, in the negative sense of the word, "conventional," is interesting not because it is "normal" but because it represents the use of convention at its most inert and unconscious. The conclusion that this use of convention is "the norm" is not a valid deduction but an unsupported, and clearly specious, value-judgment, the inconsequence of which asserts itself as soon as we admit that the concept of "normality" might be used in a different way. It was "normally" the case, throughout the studio period, that the Hollywood cinema produced large numbers of challenging and distinguished films and a smaller, but very considerable, number of major masterpieces along with the contents of the authors' unbiased sample, but this "norm" is so far from being detectable by their method, or favourable to their assumptions, that they impose a definition of the "normal" which negates it — and which is intended to do so. This definition is supposed to be "scientific," as that word is understood in the circles where the science of unbiased sampling is practised, but the more assiduously the authors claim that they are in the business of ascertaining an objectively

verifiable standard of the "ordinary," the more blatantly obvious does it come to seem that the "ordinary film" is their construction. That they should insist so loudly on the method's "objectivity" is an indication of the strength of their *parti pris*, and when we consider the banality of their findings — a banality which, in all seriousness and with righteous confidence, they attribute, not to their analysis but to its object — we very quickly discover what that *parti pris* is.

Consider, for example, the opening gambit of Mr. Bordwell's disquisition on classical narrative:

"Plot", writes Frances Patterson in a 1920 manual for aspiring screenwriters, 'is a careful and logical working out of the laws of cause and effect. The mere sequence of events will not make a plot. Emphasis must be laid upon causality and the action and reaction of the human will'. Here, in brief, is the premise of Hollywood story construction: causality, consequence, psychological motivations, the drive toward overcoming obstacles and achieving goals. Character-centred — i.e., personal or psychological — causality is the armature of the classical story." (p. 13)

"This sounds obvious," Mr. Bordwell goes on at once to add,

"... so obvious that we need to remember that narrative causality could be impersonal as well." (ibid)

Indeed! — though having remembered this, Mr. Bordwell does *not* perceive that the "i.e." in his penultimate sentence is a *non sequitur*. Hollywood movies are indeed "obviously" character-centred, but it is by no means obvious that "personal or psychological causality" is *therefore* "the armature of the classical story." Why should "character-centred" narrative causality necessarily imply *personal* causality? — and why should it be by definition incompatible with that "causality of institutions and group processes" for which Soviet films of the 1920s strike Mr. Bordwell as being so supremely remarkable (ibid)? Curiously, the question is not asked: curiously, because he tells us a few pages later that Hollywood "continues traditions stemming from the chivalric romance, the bourgeois novel and the American melodrama" (p. 16). This is a sufficiently various, and sufficiently complex, set of traditions, and the fact that they date back to the Middle Ages surely has the most unfortunate implications for the claim that "making personal character traits and goals the causes of actions led to a dramatic form fairly specific to Hollywood" (ibid). And of course, we are not even obliged to stop at the *Morte d'Arthur* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In that Homer's Ulysses has a number of very striking personal traits, not least among them a "drive toward overcoming obstacles and achieving goals" of an intensity to which John Wayne might defer, it would seem to follow that the dramatic forms specific to Hollywood (or "fairly" so) were invented in ancient Greece.

However that may be, Ulysses, John Wayne — and Captain Ahab, too — would probably have taken their hats off to Mr. Bordwell, whose heroic indifference to the obstacles which keep him from *his* goal is striking by the most exacting standards: only a writer protected by a very obstinate desire to prove his point at all costs could possibly have been convinced by the case Mr. Bordwell makes out in defence of it. Narratives have been centred on characters who set out to accomplish goals since the dawn of time, as Mr. Bordwell virtually admits — for the excellent reason that human beings are the only animals who are capable of formulating social projects independent, and often in defiance, of their instinctual drives. It is scarcely astonishing, in the light of this fact (which provides Marx with the basis for his fable of the bee and the architect), that these same human

beings are possessed of an insatiable impulse to construct symbolic dramas in which such projects are conceived, impeded, thwarted and accomplished, and in which feelings about the nature, conditions, limits and consequences of human action are worked through. Mr. Bordwell's assertion that "Hollywood characters, especially protagonists, are goal-oriented" (ibid), for all that it is couched in the David Shipman idiom, is not in itself exceptionable; but on the other hand, it is not sufficient to distinguish Ford's Ethan Edwards from Beowulf and Bunyan's pilgrim and it does not exempt the critic from the business of defining, in a given instance, what the character's goals are and what is the film's attitude to them. That the hero of *Vertigo* has goals is indisputable, and he himself remarks, in the final scene, that the struggle to achieve them has been attended by a kind of success, but no one who reads *Vertigo* at all attentively will suppose that the matter can be left there. Both the goals and the success are placed in a complex total context which defines them as something more than actions which have been completed, and it is to this context that we must refer if we wish to distinguish Scottie's goals from those of Siegfried, Coriolanus, Jane Eyre, or Pierre Bezukhov.

The reader's curiosity as to why Mr. Bordwell should be so keen to demonstrate that the presence of characters in pursuit of goals tells us anything interesting about American films is satisfied early on, at the foot of p. 16:

"It is easy to see in the goal-oriented protagonist a reflection of an ideology of American individualism and enterprise, but it is the peculiar accomplishment of the classical cinema to translate this ideology into a rigorous chain of cause and effect."

Mr. Bordwell, like all formalists, expels "content" with scorn at the front door only to welcome it home at the back, and I will have reason to return to this aspect of his method later. For the present, it will be enough to say that a "goal-oriented protagonist," and the sequential dramatisation of such a protagonist's pursuit of these goals, do not in themselves "reflect," let alone (as Mr. Bordwell implies) affirm, any ideology whatever. The goals of the protagonists of *Moby Dick*, *Scarface*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Now Voyager*, and *Blonde Venus* can, and clearly should, be referred to the existence of "an ideology of American individualism and enterprise," but they do not "reflect" it, and the narratives centred on them do not demonstrate its efficacy by virtue of their adherence to the formal rules of linear causality. It is a precondition of heroic status that a protagonist's goals should bear *some* kind of relation to the culture's dominant ideologies: one cannot imagine a culture which produces narratives with protagonists whose desires and aspirations are culturally irrelevant. Mr. Bordwell strategically ignores the possibility that a protagonist might have goals which are sanctioned by the culture but the pursuit and consummation of which turn out to be, in practice, disastrous; or again, that the protagonist might have difficulty in achieving the goals, or in formulating any constructive goals at all, because, for example, she is a woman, and her powers of practical agency are very severely circumscribed. He cannot (and in fact he refuses to) see, either that a narrative's judgment of the ideologies implicit in its protagonist's goals can only be deduced from the narrative itself, or that narratives centred on "goal-oriented" protagonists have very often been used, in all historical periods, to test, examine or criticise a culture's dominant norms by locating them in a protagonist whose goals are in some fundamental way problematic. James Stewart's goals in *It's a Wonderful Life* do (as Mr. Bordwell would have it)

"reflect" an ideology of American individualism and enterprise — for the important reason that the film is not a mirror but a complex formal structure which is dedicated to the *analysis* of the ideology.

The lack of scruple with which Mr. Bordwell sets out to impose his thesis is breathtaking. "What would narrative cinema without personalized causation be like?" he pleasantly asks:

"We have some examples (in Miklós Jancsó, Ozu, Robert Bresson, Soviet films of the 1920s), but we can find others. Erich Von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924) shows that a Naturalist causal scheme is incompatible with the classical model: the characters cannot achieve their goals, and causality is in the hands of nature and not people." (p. 18)

The "classical" cinema is littered with protagonists who cannot achieve their goals (melodrama is specifically geared to protagonists of this kind), and with many more who are destroyed by achieving them or who achieve them only to discover that they are worthless, and there could be no clearer indication of the function of the unbiased sample (dominated as it inevitably would be by marginal hack-work) than that it filters out, with predictable efficiency and (for the well-deceived) an appearance of rigorous impartiality, the kind of work that is, like *Greed*, "incompatible with the classical model" concocted by Mr. Bordwell and his collaborators. The fact that the protagonists of *Greed* fail to achieve their goals can hardly be said to explain away the evidence of their obsessional investment in them, which demonstrably "causes" the action of *Greed*; and since, *pace* Mr. Bordwell, genetic determinism is most certainly *not* the sole principle of causality in Naturalist fiction (though no one will dispute its importance), I await with interest his demonstration of the sense in which narrative causation in *Greed* (or *Le Débarcadere*, *An American Tragedy*, *The Octopus* and *USA*) can be said to be "in the hands of nature." I should also be interested to learn — if it is indeed the case that "psychologically motivated causality in the classical narrative" is a form of determinism, as Mr. Bordwell at once goes on to claim (*ibid*) — why and how it is that the "Naturalist causal scheme" is incompatible with it at all, in that the question of what the determining principle *is* is irrelevant to the structure of a determinism.

Before they address these questions, the authors of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* should probably decide whether they would prefer to have their cake or to eat it. If they wish to object to narratives in which "personal character traits and goals (are) the causes of actions," they should do so consistently, admit that the failure to realise the goals and the determination of the traits by genetic inheritance (or anything else) can have no theoretical significance whatever for persons bent on castigating such narratives, resign themselves to the fact that *Late Spring*, *Pickpocket* and *Greed* are "compatible with the classical model," and renounce Ozu, Bresson and Von Stroheim and all their works. If they do *not* wish to object to such narratives, they will have to find some other "dramatic form fairly specific to Hollywood" which can be objected to on some other ground, and some more particularised narrative datum than a goal-oriented protagonist to signify a work of art's endorsement of American individualism and enterprise. I do not doubt for a moment that they are capable of formulating such objections, the evidence of their desire to do so being so overwhelming, but Mr. Bordwell himself betrays the extreme difficulty of the task when he mentions, in the passage I began by quoting, that it is (to him) "so obvious" that "character-centred" and "personal or

psychological" causality are synonymous (p. 13), and then reminds us that "narrative causality could be impersonal as well."

"Hollywood films of course include causes of these impersonal types, but they are almost invariably subordinated to psychological causality." (p. 13)

The example he gives is, like the unbiased sample, loaded and unrepresentative, but at least it has the effect of confusing the discussion of what constitutes "impersonal" causality in narratives. It is certainly true that when major historical events are represented in Hollywood films, their causality is either ignored, drastically simplified or attributed to individuals, but on the other hand this treatment of history is not peculiar to "the classical film," and it tells us nothing about a work's artistic value. *Marie Antoinette* is a bad film and it gives a highly tendentious and misleading account of the history of France in the late 18th century, but if it is bad *because* "the classical film makes history unknowable apart from its effects on individual characters," then we are surely obliged to conclude that not only *The Scarlet Empress*, but also *War and Peace*, *Redgauntlet*, and Shakespeare's history plays are bad classical films. Inaccuracies and simplifications of historical fact in a work of scholarship are very seriously culpable, but they are not in themselves valid criteria for impugning works of art which represent historical events. If *Antony and Cleopatra* makes history unknowable apart from its effects on Antony, Cleopatra, Octavius, Lepidus and Enobarbus, then the play is to be judged in the light of Shakespeare's realisation of these effects, and readers concerned to "know history" in the historian's sense, in which Shakespeare shows not the slightest interest, should seek out material less likely to disappoint them. All cultures, of course, are exceptionally sensitive to the depiction of the past, and the conventions which govern its representation in works of art are often elaborately mystified: Shakespeare's histories, the western and those "Soviet films of the 1920s" are obvious cases in point. It follows, therefore, that an Elizabethan history play or a western is to be judged, not by its reliability, justice or accuracy as *history* but by its use of the conventions — which pertain, in any case, not to the past as such, but to an ideological construction of the past sanctioned by the dominant culture in which the artist is working. As narratives which make history knowable, *Richard III* and *To Have and Have Not* are somewhat more than risible: as critical interventions in the convention which mediates the depiction of the history concerned, they are interesting — and even good. I will add (though the news will shock Mr. Bordwell) that *classical* films are by no means exceptional, either for their mystification of historical causality or for their interest in dramatising the effects of history on individuals, as the work of Mizoguchi, Dreyer, Vertov, Eisenstein, Bresson, Resnais and Godard (among the directors he is known to favour) sufficiently attest. Indeed, *Ivan the Terrible* (to which one of Mr. Bordwell's collaborators has dedicated a lengthy study) indulges both of these classical vices on an elephantine scale — though Kristin Thompson's book has convinced me, and might surely have convinced Mr. Bordwell, that *Ivan the Terrible* is *not* a classical film.

Mr. Bordwell's aside on the classical film's betrayal of historical truth strikes us as confusing the issue, not merely because it is in itself nonsensical, but because it creates the impression that narratives in which a principle of "personal or psychological" causality can be shown to operate necessarily subordinate "impersonal" causality to it. Unfortunately, this is not the point which his argument proves — though the fact

that he takes it to do so is certainly a significant datum for the critical reader of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. *Ivan the Terrible* and *The Scarlet Empress* certainly "make history unknowable apart from its effect upon individual characters," but this description throws no light at all on the way in which the characters are conceived, and when we actually examine these works we find that "personal" and "impersonal" causality are continuous with one another — that the films construe the "personal" goals and the "psychological" traits in terms of objective social forces which are neither personal nor psychological. The opposition between "personal" and "impersonal" narrative causality is wholly unreal, and while Mr. Bordwell is familiar with "the chivalric romance, the bourgeois novel and the American melodrama" the extent to which his study of these forms has failed to enlighten his critical practice is suggested when he informs us that causality might be conceived as "social" rather than "personal" and goes on to adduce the Soviet silent film. What on earth does Mr. Bordwell imagine the causality of *Great Expectations* and *Way Down East* to be? "The bourgeois novel and the American melodrama" are precisely remarkable, in their different ways, for their development of a way of conceptualizing "character" in which personal traits, more or less complexly realized, are perceived as representative social traits, and in which individual feelings and behaviour are referred to the objective social world in which the characters live. The protagonists of *Dombey and Son*, *The House of Mirth*, *The Devil is a Woman*, *While the City Sleeps* and *Marnie* are individuals with goals and traits, but if we persist in viewing them as being "individual" in some sense which precludes their being at the same time the focal points of "a causality of institutions and group processes" then we will not understand the works — as *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* so largely demonstrates.

I am not quite sure in what ways, specifically, Hollywood continues the traditions of the chivalric romance, but since Mr. Bordwell brings it up I will take the opportunity he offers of suggesting that what the chivalric romance proves, in this context, is that the impersonal conception of individual character is not in itself very new. The narrative act *is*, where character is concerned, a dramatic process through which the structures of impersonal causality which bear on "the personal" are defined, and the fact that this is so helps to explain our interest in making, and attending to, stories about people. There has *never* been a narrative in which private individuals pursued personal goals and exhibited personal tics and idiosyncracies, and if Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues find so many such narratives in "classical" Hollywood, that is because their formalist method banalises everything it touches. At any given historical moment, a culture offers its inhabitants a certain set of terms with which to make sense of the impersonal determinants of individual feelings and actions, and we must understand narration as an activity of reality-testing whereby the nature, content and adequacy of these terms are examined and re-examined through the histories of representative symbolic figures. It is precisely *because* narrative poses "character-centred causality" in relation to "causes of impersonal types" that we *have* narrative, and one of our major criteria in the judgment of a narrative work is our sense of whether the work is *exploring* (to a greater or lesser degree of profundity) the understandings of impersonal cause which the culture makes available or merely reproducing them.

The specificity of bourgeois narrative, as has often been noted, is that the understandings of impersonal cause which it embodies are predominantly social and secular, which is

why it has been increasingly difficult since the early 19th century (and is now impossible) to produce valid religious art. "Predominant," of course, does not imply "exclusive," still less "uncontradictory." Long before the bourgeois period we find narratives like *Piers Plowman* and *The Canterbury Tales* in which "character-centred causality" is quite explicitly referred to a secular causality of social processes and institutions, but which also assume the reality of causes which are explicitly metaphysical, and the organisation of the latter work *as* a series of separate, interrelated tales is obviously determined by this fact: the *status* of the impersonal (social or metaphysical?) is one of the themes of the work. Conversely, we will find many bourgeois narratives in which the characters embody a principle of cause which is not social, or through whom social causality is so thoroughly mystified that it effectively becomes metaphysical, as in much (though not all) Naturalist fiction. The point to be made, however, is that the individual characters in a narrative enact some concept of "supraindividual causality" *by definition* (this is what a narrative *is*) and that in the great Hollywood movies, which are exemplary bourgeois works, the content of this concept is *social*: character-centred causality is inseparable from the dramatisation, often highly critical, of the impersonal social forces which structure individuality in 20th century bourgeois culture.

If Mr. Bordwell had read "the bourgeois novel and the American melodrama" more carefully (for it is from these traditions that the Hollywood cinema does indeed stem) he might have reached this conclusion on his own, for it is hard to see how anyone who had paid the most superficial attention to the development of prose fiction in the 18th and 19th centuries could have failed to grasp that the attempt to analyse character in relation to a "causality of institutions and group processes" is the imaginative drive behind the bourgeois novel. He might also have perceived that the most striking thing about the development of prose fiction in *America* (and he is supposed, after all, to be analyzing an American form) is the quite extraordinary insistence and explicitness, unparalleled in any other national tradition, with which the novel's status as a symbolic drama about the institutions and value-systems of the culture is enforced. There is no equivalent of Tolstoy or George Eliot in the American tradition, and it is significant that when we *do* find an American novelist who has been deeply influenced both by the complex psychological realism and by the materialist sociology of the author of *Middlemarch* — as we do in Henry James — this influence has been crucially modified by the influence of Hawthorne and the concept of the novel (and tale) as critical, schematic fable which Hawthorne, with Poe and Melville, established. "Schematic" here should not be taken to connote "the absence of complexity": there is nothing simple or simplifying about *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick* or *The Golden Bowl*. I mean only that the central American narrative tradition in the 19th century — which derives, as I've noted elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> from the secularisation of allegory as Gothic melodrama — is peculiar for the way in which it assimilates the conventions of bourgeois prose fiction to a conception of the fictional action as symbolic process which is very close to allegory, and that within this tradition the fact that "character-centred causality" is *not* primarily "personal or psychological" is emphasised by the narrative form itself. What reader who was even half awake can ever have imagined that s/he had anything to gain by reading such character-centred narratives as *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *My Kinsman Major Molyneux*, *Bartleby*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *The Europeans* as studies of the personal traits and goals of their cen-

tral actors, or that the authors of these works were encouraging the reader to do so? We are *told*, explicitly and systematically, that the characters, and the dramatic world in which they move, are symbolic: and it is this fictional tradition which feeds into, and becomes the decisive formative influence on, the narrative style of the Hollywood cinema.

Of course, the same tradition produces the dime novel — to which Mr. Bordwell would love to reduce it: "the popular short story," he tells us, "acted as a model for narrowing . . . individualized characterisation to fixed limits" (p. 14). This may well be true, though its truth is not substantiated by Mr. Bordwell: but since the American narrative tradition provided many "models for narrowing individualized characterisation to fixed limits," with results more impressive and aims more complex than are to be found in what Mr. Bordwell means by "the popular short story," this truth (or assertion) is neither here nor there. The pejorative nature of the intention emerges even more clearly here:

"From the nineteenth century melodrama's stock characterizations, Hollywood has borrowed the need for sharply delineated and unambiguous traits." (p. 13-14)

Mr. Bordwell shows not the slightest awareness that the American melodramatic tradition also includes Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Stowe and James. He assumes, as he assumes throughout, that a tradition can be represented by its most inferior products, and that if it can be shown that a convention has been used meretriciously (as all conventions have) then this in some way disposes of the convention. He also assumes that a tradition, like a child of tainted blood, carries forever the stigma of its origins. Even if it were *not* the case that the Hollywood cinema had behind it a sophisticated literary tradition which, primarily through Griffith, came to include Dickens, and which was in general exemplary of the use of popular, melodramatic and highly schematized symbolic forms for profoundly serious purposes, it would hardly follow from the mere fact of the borrowing of "stock characterizations" from rather *unsophisticated* traditions that Hollywood did not later transform what it had borrowed. It would be perfectly possible for someone who wished to frame Mr. Bordwell's kind of argument to assert that English Renaissance dramatists borrowed stock tropes and rhetorical formulae from the *Emblem* books, or that 18th century novelists took over stock characterizations and narrative formats from contemporary journalism, or that Verdi and Wagner appropriated stock musical and theatrical structures from academic grand opera. All this is true — but it is not an insult, and such knowledge is worse than useless if it is not accompanied by knowledge of what was later done with the borrowings. Hawthorne's tales, Griffith's *Way Down East*, Cukor's *Gaslight* and Sirk's *Written on the Wind* have, as American melodramas, a great deal in common with the literary lumpenproletariat adduced by Mr. Bordwell, including the reduction of characters to "consistent bundles of a few salient traits" (p. 14). The "salience" is only the critic's primary concern, though Mr. Bordwell, of course, ignores it because the *use* of convention is not salient for the formalist approach.

If Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues were challenged on this ground, they would no doubt reply that their conclusions were authenticated by the unbiased sample, cornucopia as it is of such deathless monuments of the human spirit as *The Merry Wives of Reno*, *The Three Must-Get-Theres*, *Sh! The Octopus*, *The Speed Spook*, and *The Case of the Lucky Legs*. I should add, in justice to these works, that they may well be masterpieces. The hypothesis is, I admit, unlikely, but the approach to which they and their ilk are submitted in *The*

*Classical Hollywood Cinema* is not such as to allow us to adjudicate the issue; and it ought to be said that an approach, or method, which bases its findings so largely on descriptions of works which few readers are likely to have seen, and which so often rests its case on assertions that the reader is not in a position to check, is both arrogant and, procedurally, highly dubious. I am loathe to consign *Sh! The Octopus* to the dustbin of history on the evidence of authors who find nothing of interest to say about such interesting or considerable works as the sample contains, but I will assume, for the purposes of argument, and until I am blessed with the opportunity to give it the close and undivided attention which it might deserve, that it answers perfectly to the "model of the ordinary film" which the collaborating writers construct. Even if it does so, however (and I concede that the cast — Hugh Herbert, Allen Jenkins, Marcia Ralston, is less than auspicious), it is not a "model" from which one can deduce, or to which one can assimilate, the formal structure of *Tarnished Angels*, or even *Mr. Skeffington* — one of the many undistinguished works included in the sample which is, nevertheless, of some interest as a document. It is implicit in the authors' much-vaunted approach that a work's "form" is synonymous with the technical "devices" it employs (understood, as we have seen, as mere devices), and that these devices in their turn work in determinate ways according to "the functions" that the stylistic system assigns to them (p. 6). Their pious faith in this grotesquely mechanical determinism moves the authors to displays of *suffisance* by which, in retrospect, they must surely be embarrassed. "No auteur critic has in practice shown," Mr. Bordwell, *en grand seigneur*, announces,

"that, say, the shot/reverse shot patterns or the usage of lighting across all of Sirk's films constitute a distinct handling of the classical paradigm; what stands out in an individual film is what stands out in the work as a whole (e.g. a tendency toward blatant symbolism for some purposes)." (p. 80)

It is, of course, significant, that at moments such as these (and there are a great many of them) Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues should find themselves in the mental world of the TV Guide, whose language and presumptions come to hand, in that final clause, with such betraying ease. To ask for it to be "shown in practice" that Sirk's handling of the shot/reverse-shot convention is *in itself* distinct is rather like asking for a demonstration of Haydn's "distinct handling" of the convention which divides the classical symphony into four movements. It is the music written *in* the convention which is distinct, and it is this music, too, which constitutes the form of Haydn's symphonies. Sirk's handling of Hollywood editing conventions is, precisely, a *handling* of them: that is to say, it is inseparable from the specific formal/dramatic context created by a specific work — a context which is defined, not only by the use of cutting, but also by the direction of actors, the use of colour, the composition of the frame, shot-length, editing *rhythm* and "a tendency toward blatant symbolism for some purposes" — and we cannot analyse the formal properties of Sirk's editing without analyzing this context *as a whole*. When he takes the "auteur critic" to task for failing to show the distinctness of Sirk's use of a convention which cannot actually *be* used independently of other conventions — their use, in this particular conjunction, *being* the form of the work — Mr. Bordwell intimates no more than that questions of artistic form are not susceptible of discussion by a formalist.

This may seem a harsh conclusion, but it is difficult to read *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* for long (or so it seems to

me) without finding fresh evidence of its justice. Consider, for example, this:

"At the most abstract level of generality, narrative causality dominates the (Hollywood) film's spatial and temporal systems. We have already seen how genre, spectacle, technical virtuosity, and other factors encourage narrative to slip a bit from prominence, only to allow the narration to compensate for this slip by adjusting its overall structure. In a similar fashion, authorial reshifting of the hierarchy of systems vie for prominence with narrative causality and even override it; Bresson, Tati, Mizoguchi, Ozu, Snow, Frampton, *et. al* can in various ways problematize narrative, making overt narration a pervasive presence. But there is little chance in Hollywood of what Burch calls "organic dialectics," the possibility of using purely stylistic parameters to determine the shape of the film (including its narrative)." (p.78-9)

Mr. Bordwell is drawn to the phrase "purely stylistic parameters" by the same force which attracts him to the baleful concept of "artistic motivation," one of the stock characterizations which he borrows from the Russian formalists. What are "purely stylistic parameters"? — and how could they be identified? Style in art only exists as the articulation of materials, and it *has* no parameters independent of the process of articulating them. It may well be the case, as Mr. Bordwell claims, that Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (which I have not seen) "creates a play of spatial and temporal relations among elements discovered in but freed from a narrational matrix" (ibid), but it does not follow (insofar as this description of *Rose Hobart* is comprehensible) that "the shape of the film" has been determined by pure style. If the film *has* a shape, and if it does indeed "create . . . relations among elements," then it *is*, for the purposes of a discussion of its "style," the structure of elements so related, and our analysis and judgment of the style will be continuous with our analysis of the meaning generated by the structure. My ungracious suspicion that the description of *Rose Hobart* is *not* comprehensible arises from the description's contiguity with equivalent assertions about Ozu and Mizoguchi (the other names, I confess, do not greatly concern me) which are demonstrably false. I have never been convinced by Mr. Bordwell's account of Ozu's "stylistic systems," for the reasons I gave many years ago when he first propounded it,<sup>3</sup> and the passage of time has only confirmed my initial feeling that no one could have had such an account to offer who was not more interested in snatching Ozu, for whatever reason, from the omnivorous maw of "classical narrative" than in the works which Ozu actually made. Mr. Bordwell is welcome to the proposition that no Hollywood director could have used space as Ozu uses it. Nor could any English, German, Spanish or Indian director; and if Ozu *does* belong to "modernism" (a word which, in contemporary polite usage, is on the verge of becoming meaningless except as a term of, according to taste, vague abuse or approbation) then some more convincing proof will have to be found than the extreme unlikeness of his style to the styles of directors working in different cultural traditions who have been arbitrarily lumped together as representatives of "classicism." I am at one with Mr. Bordwell in setting a supremely high value on the work of Ozu and Mizoguchi, but I am sure that a writer who puts them in the same company with Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton, as exemplars of "the same kind of thing," has not the faintest notion of what this value is; and I am sure, too, that any "auteur critic," on any day of the week, could advance exactly the same claims which Mr. Bordwell makes for Ozu on behalf of, say, Hawks, by simply following Mr. Bordwell's

lead and extrapolating Hawks' stylistic systems from the culture and the history in which Hawks arrived at them. It would be hard to think of a director whose style is more deeply rooted in traditional "schemata" (to take up the proffered term) than Ozu's, and this style manifests itself, in his surviving works, as a series of family comedies and family melodramas. It has never seemed to me that the author of *Late Spring* and *An Autumn Afternoon* (or of *Sisters of Gion* and *Ugetsu Monogatari*) either wished to "free himself from a narrational matrix" or thought of this matrix as a trap, and I find it curious that Mr. Bordwell should *want* to praise so desolating a work as *Tokyo Story* on the grounds that "its temporal and spatial systems vie for prominence with narrative causality." The fact that they plainly *don't* suggests that Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues share that impulse to keep works of art at a safe distance (the distance necessary to "see through" them) for which so much contemporary bourgeois ratiocination on cultural subjects is remarkable; but the same fact is suggestive of much more than the character of a prevailing *niveau*. Mr. Bordwell tells us, of Hitchcock and Preminger, that

"both auteurs remain within classical bounds: Hitchcock cannot always keep us aware of his narrational presence, whereas Preminger will often claim his *droit du seigneur* (*sic*) at the end of a film by an overt camera movement." (p. 80)

Who is "us"? If this is the royal prerogative then I have no quarrel with Mr. Bordwell, but on the other hand if "we" are in possession of the category "Hitchcock-as-narrator" then we will always be aware of his narrational presence, and find that it "pervades" *Marnie* as completely as Michael Snow's pervaded *Wavelength*. The significance of Mr. Bordwell's weird assumption that narration does or does not pervade, independently of the spectator's having the concepts of "narration" or "Preminger's authorship," emerges when he tells us, à propos *Rear Window*, that

"for the viewer, constructing the story takes precedence (over interpretation); the effects of the text are registered, but its causes go unremarked."<sup>4</sup>

This "viewer," plainly, is the dumb schmuck in the back row of the local fleapit, but it is also Mr. Bordwell, who devotes all the powers of strained intellection at his disposal to establish the truth that Hollis Frampton's narration is, quite apart from any act of reading, objectively "overt" and that Hitchcock's, except in special circumstances, is not. The "causes" of *Rear Window*, in Mr. Bordwell's reading, do indeed "go unremarked," but this is the fault, less of Hitchcock or "the classical style" than of Mr. Bordwell himself, who has decided that narrative causality "takes precedence" over the spatial and temporal systems of Hollywood films and who is therefore unable to read the films — which are only there to be read, alas, inasmuch as these systems organise their narratives. Mr. Bordwell's benighted viewer, unless pump-primed by himself and his collaborators, would "construct the stories" of *Ordet* and *Les Vacances de M. Hulot* as obstinately as those of *Rear Window* and *Laura*, and the possibility should at least be considered that in doing so s/he would stand a rather better chance of comprehending the temporal and spatial systems of Hitchcock and Preminger than Mr. Bordwell does.

The criterion of "overt narration" which Mr. Bordwell employs is extremely exacting: anything which is, in his opinion, "motivated by realism or genre or story causality" (p. 79) is peremptorily disqualified. I do not know what Mr.

Bordwell means by "realistic motivation," and he does not know either — or so I assume from the fact that the example of it which he gives is a film set in 19th century England in which the actors are dressed in 19th century costumes (p. 19) — but if this criterion is allowed to stand it is difficult to see what kind of narration is left. The precedent which Mr. Bordwell sets surely has the most alarming implications for our judgment of the work of Ozu and Mizoguchi, if only because the characters in their films are invariably dressed in clothes appropriate to the period in which the action takes place: Mizoguchi's narration (at least, in the films I have seen) never becomes so overt that he dresses medieval Japanese peasants in tuxedos and crinolines, or obliges his leading actresses to negotiate the streets of 19th century Tokyo beneath a Pompadour. Mr. Bordwell's blithe indifference to contradictions of this kind is symptomatic of the grim-lipped desperation with which he sticks to his approach, to which the films will and must be made to correspond, even when their failure to do so is, for the reader who cannot share the writer's enthusiasms, most blatant and most ludicrous.

The kind of theoretical misconception (if that's the word) which the approach, or method, of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* so spectacularly exemplifies is admirably described by Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner in their indispensable book *Romanticism and Realism: the Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art*<sup>5</sup> — it is in fact a model of critical writing (or ought to be: I have never met anybody who has heard of it). Recalling Hugh Honour's contention that there is, in Romantic art, "no common language of visual forms and means of expression comparable with the Baroque or Rococo," Rosen and Zerner write:

"This distinction between Romanticism and earlier 'styles' is not tenable except with a certain amount of juggling and no little confusion. It works only by a narrow definition of, say, the Baroque and a wide one of Romanticism: . . . A "common language" for Baroque art could be arrived at only by resolutely excluding anything that does not fit, and casting it out as non-Baroque. The problem here is a naive methodology, which defines a style by listing the characteristics that a given number of roughly contemporary works have in common." (ibid. p. 31)

"Underlying this method," the authors go on,

"is often an even more naive belief that works that belong to the same style ought to look alike. Anthony Blunt, for example, defined Baroque architecture by the Roman style of Bernini and Borromini; he admitted as Baroque anything that resembled their works or was obviously derived from them, and disqualified everything else. This kind of definition is distinguished by its consistency, rigidity and poverty. It does not stimulate understanding but leads to pigeonholing, to a dead end of classification, of no use as a tool of analysis. Works are disposed of as Baroque or non-Baroque, Romantic or non-Romantic, as if these were categories that had some objective historical reality. But terms like "Baroque" or "Romantic" do not designate well-defined entities or even systems. They are primitive short-hand signs for long-range historical developments that one feels nevertheless to have a certain integrity." (ibid.)

This leaves little more to be said, and its pertinence to the case of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* is illustrated by Mr. Bordwell himself when he refers, in passing, to "the problem . . . of defining 'non-classical' styles" (p. 75). The definition of *classical* styles poses no problem at all and Mr. Bordwell, armed with this confidence, can then proceed, without so much as a blush, to castigate critics who take "style terms"

such as "Baroque" as a "positive definition and . . . try to find the essential traits of the style" (ibid). Called on to distinguish between Mr. Bordwell and his collaborators and Hugh Honour and Anthony Blunt, we would find ourselves obliged to say that for the former the pigeonholing process is an act of aggression, almost of vandalism: it is a method (both more strenuous and more circuitous than the one we are used to) for belittling and demeaning the films, and explaining them definitively away.

"The typical thematic interpretation of an auteur film commences by summarizing the story action, moves to a psychological description of the characters and abstract thematic oppositions, and buttresses the reading with a rundown of privileged motifs that reinforce the themes. The very form of such essays confirms the fluctuations of classical narration. In each film, the auteur critic invariably turns up great swatches of the classical style . . ." (p. 80)

The insistence of this vocabulary and this tone (which a responsible critic should not permit himself), and the significance of Mr. Bordwell's querulous hostility to a discourse that fails either to coincide with or to confirm the assumptions and conclusions of his own, are unmistakable. It is hardly a coincidence, therefore, that when (as I have put it) Mr. Bordwell welcomes home at the back door the "auteur critic's" preoccupation with ideology and thematic interpretation, the features of the now-honoured guest should turn out to be so very familiar.

"Our examination of classical narration has shown that it accustoms spectators to a limited and highly probable range of expectations. Classical narration's reliability habituates the viewer to accepting regulated impersonality and sourceless authority." (p. 83)

As the triumphant upshot of 500 pages of scholarly prose this seems to me to be less than impressive, and nothing suggests more clearly the redundancy of this conclusion than the genuflection to Adorno in the sentence which precedes the passage I have quoted. But of course, Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues do *not* "show" this, anymore than they "show" that

"Hollywood cinema has been made stringently uniform by its dependence upon a specific economic mode of film production and consumption." (p. 6)

In fact, the two halves of the book fail to coincide: the claim to demonstrate the absolute determination of "film style" by "mode of production" remains, inevitably, merely a claim. It is itself a component of the general pejorative intention, and Hollywood films have to be pretty thoroughly worked over by the formalist approach before that "stringent uniformity" can be ascribed to them which the mode of production is supposed to have determined.

Mr. Bordwell's quest for uniformity is as stringent as the uniformity itself, and in pursuing it he goes one better than Anthony Blunt, who was content merely to exclude from the category of "Baroque architecture" any building that did not resemble the work of Bernini. Mr. Bordwell cherishes the loftier ambition of re-describing every film ever made in Hollywood in such a way that it will appear to resemble the work of H. Bruce Humberstone, and chapter seven of the book, "The bounds of difference," which deals with the auteur theory, film noir and Hollywood's assimilation of the European avant-garde, and in which the ambition asserts itself most implacably, seems to me to be, without doubt, the most monumental *chutzpah* in the history of Hollywood crit-

icism. To call it *chutzpah* is not to suggest that Mr. Bordwell isn't taking it seriously. He is dealing, he knows, with three deadly enemies, any one of whom could seriously undermine the central thesis of the book and who, should they form a united front, would have little difficulty in bringing the whole elaborate edifice tumbling down around his ears; and he proceeds, therefore — with the understandable bitterness of a man who has dedicated months of his life to the unholy task of dissecting *Sh! The Octopus* — to screw his courage to the sticking-place, to seek and to kill.

Consider, as exemplary, the bloody snuffing-out of film noir — an antagonist whose many obnoxious features, grimly enumerated by Mr. Bordwell between clenched teeth (the undermining of "classical conventions of logical action," the "assault on psychological causality," the critique of heterosexuality, the repudiation of closure, the challenge to "the neutrality and 'invisibility' of classical style," the "dis-orientation" of the spectator) foredoomed it, sooner or later, to his undying enmity: it is, indeed, the epitome of everything that a classical film cannot conceivably be. Mr. Bordwell appraises the loathsome heretical object with icy contempt for some moments, pondering the most efficient method of attack, and then opts boldly for a vicious surprise-assault on its exposed ontologicals: speaking *ex-cathedra*, he issues a Declaration of Total Oblivion whereby the object shall be deemed henceforth to have no finite existence. "What is film noir?" he scornfully asks:

"Not a genre. Producers and consumers both recognize a genre as a distinct entity; nobody set out to make or see a film noir in the sense that people deliberately chose to make a Western, a comedy, or a musical." (p. 75)

Perhaps not: but people *did* set out to make and to see *The Big Sleep*, *Out of the Past*, *Detour*, *The Lady from Shanghai* and *Double Indemnity*, and although these pitiful sallies and alarums were not illuminated by the critical concept which has excited Mr. Bordwell's wrath, the fact that Hawks and Tourneur could not have told themselves that they were making "films noirs" does not eradicate the works they produced or the conventions which *The Big Sleep* and *Out of the Past* have in common, both with each other and with *Follow Me Quietly* and *The Maltese Falcon*: even Mr. Bordwell can hardly suppose that George Eliot sat down at her desk with the aim of writing a "bourgeois realist novel."

"Is film noir then a style? Critics have not succeeded in defining specifically noir visual techniques (one [*sic*] that would include, say, *Laura* (1944) and *Touch of Evil* (1957)) or narrative structure (one that would include *policiers*, melodramas, and historical films like *Reign of Terror* (1949))." (ibid)

Bad syntax is often telling, particularly when it passes the proof-reading stage, and what it tells us here is that Mr. Bordwell's animus against film noir is primarily a matter of its refusal (to borrow a phrase from Rosen and Zerner) to "sit still for its portrait."

"Two respected critics find only twenty-two films noirs; a recent book on the subject lists over two hundred and fifty. Another critic's list includes *High Noon* (1952) and *2001* (1968)." (ibid)

Mr. Bordwell is as baffled as any fleapit voyeur confronting the looming prospect of *Gertrude*: he cannot "construct the story," he does not know how many films noirs there really are, and if he were faced with an examination paper which demanded to know what the "visual techniques" of *Laura*

and *Touch of Evil* have in common he would not be able to give "the right answer." It is even the case that "respected critics" disagree on the subject, and that one of them has gone so far as to procure intimate and immoral contact between film noir and what might have seemed, at first glance, to be a perfectly decent western. *Sh! The Octopus*, stretched on the rack of Mr. Bordwell's viewing-table, yields up the secrets of its inner life with commendable promptitude, but *Reign of Terror* is stubbornly equivocal: it purports to be an "historical film," but at the same time it flaunts its perverse knowledge of the narrative structures and visual styles of other genres. Textual miscegenation — the brazen public congress of discrete style-terms — is, from the point of view of "the approach," the most abominable of crimes, and film noir has no one but itself to thank if Mr. Bordwell at once goes on to pass upon it the film theorist's equivalent of God's judgment of the Cities of the Plains.

The whole shocking mess can be traced back, apparently, to "the summer and fall of 1946," when a group of snotty French intellectuals, concerned "less to define than to differentiate," saw "a new sort of American film for the first time" and, in the innocent conviction that it *was* new, cooked up the term "film noir" to distinguish it "from the mainstream Hollywood product." Later critics have persistently failed to see that this illusory category, deriving as it does from a criminal addiction to the making of distinctions, is little more than a symptom of chronic culture-shock after "years of occupation," and "have continued to use 'film noir' as a constitutive category, forgetting that it emerged as what Gombrich calls a term of exclusion":

"Thus we inherit a category constructed *ex post facto* out of a perceived resemblance between continental crime melodramas and a few Hollywood productions." (p. 75)

So much for Buckingham! Its vile pedigree laid bare, and its promiscuous history of critical gang-bangs and one-night-stands held up for all to see, film noir falls to the ground in agony, clutching its bleeding ontologicals.

But suddenly Mr. Bordwell seems to remind himself that there is more than one way to skin a cat, and with a Jesuitical leer he bends down and offers film noir a band-aid. It can have its ontological status back:

"It is not a trivial description of film noir to say that it simply indicates particular patterns of nonconformity within Hollywood." (ibid)

The Declaration of Total Oblivion is generously withdrawn — but only on condition (it rapidly transpires) that film noir should agree to confine its "patterns of nonconformity" within "specific and non-subversive conventions" (p. 76) and that it should accept that it is as miserable as, and essentially indistinguishable from, all other objects of its kind. Film noir, that is, can be deemed to exist so long as it is prepared to lead a life of chastity from now on.

With this stern injunction on his lips, Mr. Bordwell proceeds to "solve the case" (his own phrase) of a thoroughly chastened and humbly grateful film noir, and the solution is both simple and predictable.

"Every characteristic narrative device of film noir was already conventional in American crime fiction and drama of the 1930s and 1940s,"

he tells us (p. 76); and to drive the point home he announces twice in the space of a single paragraph that a given literary convention had been "made respectable" long before it came to have an influence on Hollywood (ibid). What Mr. Bord-

well means by this (I presume) is that Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Graham Greene and others were taken to be serious and distinguished writers by an intelligent contemporary public; and whether or not we agree with this judgment (which I, in fact, do not) it is critically improper to deduce from it that the convention in question has been domesticated ideologically. I cannot see, either, what sin it is that Mr. Bordwell imagines himself to have identified when he points out that a literary convention has demonstrably influenced the narrative conventions of another art form, or that "almost 20 per cent of the films noirs made between 1941 and 1948 (are) adaptations of hard-boiled novels" (ibid); though that this *is* a sin for Mr. Bordwell certainly indicates that if anyone should ever decide to take out a contract on Shakespeare, Verdi or Alban Berg, he is the man for the job. In any case, this still leaves 80 per cent of the buggers to be accounted for, so Mr. Bordwell is obliged to brandish his cutlass at "the psychological thriller," which "underwent rejuvenation during the 1930s, in novels and plays by Frances Iles, Emlyn Williams and Patrick Hamilton" (ibid). In what sense Cukor's *Gaslight* can be said to be the "result" of Patrick Hamilton's "successful play *Angel Street*," let alone the novels of Frances Iles, as Mr. Bordwell claims, I cannot say. The play is certainly Cukor's starting point, but his film is so utterly different in theme, tone and structure, so obstinately inseparable from the temporal and spatial systems of his *mise-en-scène*, and so obviously the bastard progeny of a wild fling between "film noir" and "the woman's movie," that to call it the "result" of either *Angel Street* or its success seems about as helpful and as pertinent as the delightful claim (again, in Leonard Maltin-speak) that *Gaslight* is one of "a series of films stressing abnormal psychology and murder in a middle-class setting" (ibid). Mr. Bordwell intends to say, I suppose, that "not all marriages are like that," and with this sturdy common-sense I readily concur: if things were in general that bad, we would have had the revolution long ago. There is nothing "abnormal," however, about the "psychology" of the characters, and *Gaslight* is so profoundly disturbing because it takes the logic of the norms to their limit: Paula and Gregory Anton do not represent "the typical," but the power and the very meaning of the film depend on the fact that they *do* represent the continuation of it.

This, of course, is the kind of consideration which Mr. Bordwell disdains to countenance, his business being to specify the objective formal systems which construct the film and the meanings and spectatorial activities objectively determined by them.

"My account of *Rear Window* does not constitute a critical interpretation. I have not labeled Jeff a voyeur, judged his peeping naughty or nice, or sought to establish him as a "castrated" adventurer fantasizing the dismembering of a woman's body. Indeed, my sketch is not even an analysis of the film, since specifying the spectator's activity cannot itself provide that."<sup>6</sup>

The disingenuousness is total — and one wonders with keen interest how far Mr. Bordwell is prepared to go in this direction. If, for example, he ever brought his method to bear on *Triumph of the Will*, would he also refrain (as so many "film critics" have done before him) from judging whether Leni Riefenstahl was "naughty or nice," or whether her film is or is not a celebration of the Nazi Party? It may be thought that he protests a little too much — for it goes without saying that he makes his critical interpretation anyway:

"Every fiction film does what *Rear Window* does: . . . Of

course, not every film reinforces such conventional ideological categories (nagging wife, society model, adventurous photographer, lusty newlyweds, old maid) and places such trust in the connection between seeing and understanding."<sup>7</sup>

No amount of caution or vigilance can save Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues from disasters of this kind, so little conscious are they of the impertinence of their method to the material they are analyzing or of the energy of repudiation which fuels the drive to impose the method. I do not know, and will not speculate, where that energy comes from, but that the drive behind the book is of this kind seems to me unquestionable, and it always manifests itself with glaring clarity whenever the authors venture, or fail to conceal, a judgment of value. Again and again, their descriptions imply a measure of appreciation:

"The Hollywood auteur film offers a particular pleasure and knowledge: the spectator comes to recognize norm and deviation oscillating, perhaps wrestling, within the same art work, that work being actively contained by the pressures of tradition." (p. 82)

This is admirably put, and "pleasure and knowledge" would certainly seem to be positive terms: but again and again, too, the impulse to annihilate the pleasure and deny the knowledge insists on its presence and its dominance. What sort of pleasure in, or knowledge of, the Hollywood auteur film is compatible with that amazing, that scarcely credible, assertion that *Rear Window* (of all films!!) "places such trust in the connection between seeing and understanding"; with those references to Sirk's "blatant symbolism" and "swatches" of classical style; and with the breathless intensity with which Mr. Bordwell — in the teeth (hence the intensity) of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary — sets out to prove that the auteur can do little more than "choose how to be redundant" or that Murnau, Lubitsch, Ford, Keaton and Borzage, for all their "greatness," are to be thought of primarily (or at all), where a discussion of the 1920s is concerned, as having failed to "displace the sovereignty of the story in the classical model"? What sense is it of the imputed greatness of Lubitsch, Murnau and Keaton which limits their range of expressive action to the choice of redundancy and the momentary "disruption" of classical norms, but which attributes to the authors of Hollywood screenplay manuals an artistic power and influence of what would seem to be all-embracing scope? What critic, having become aware of the existence and distinction of these artists, would *want* to think that *Sh! The Octopus* is, in any sense, a representative Hollywood film, and then write a lengthy book in which it is shown that John Ford "failed to displace the sovereignty of" the paradigm which *Sh! The Octopus* embodies? And for what reader prepared to expend the time and energy required to ingest such a book can the *following* admonition be intended?

"At the same time, however, we cannot denounce the Hollywood style as uniformly suspect." (p. 83)

The reader implied by this remark, as its context makes plain, is none other than Mr. Bordwell himself, who has just reached the climax of a denunciation which now, apparently, "we" cannot make, and who suddenly finds himself in the embarrassing position of having won a Pyrrhic victory. The field is his, but everyone is dead.

The paradoxical result of these arduous labours is that Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues give us almost no idea whatever of what the conventional limits were within which "the clas-

sical Hollywood cinema" actually operated: we are no closer to an understanding of "the bounds of difference" when we set the book aside, exhausted, at the end than we were when we picked it up, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, at the beginning. The authors invent constraints where none exist, and the major works through the analysis of which they might have been able to establish the real boundaries of the Hollywood style have to be ruthlessly travestied in the compelling interests of the grand formalist design.

"If you are a classical filmmaker, you cannot light a scene in such a way as to obscure the locale entirely (cf. Godard in *Le gai savoir*); you cannot pan or track without some narrative or generic motivation; you cannot make every shot one second long (cf. certain avant-garde works)." (p. 5)

If the first and the third of these items do indeed constitute "limitations" I cannot in honesty say (despite the single prestigious example offered) that they strike me as being very onerous ones, and I do not understand why Mr. Bordwell supposes that they are. Had he said that "if you are a classical filmmaker you cannot stage a shot like the first shot of the Maison Tellier sequence in *Le Plaisir* or make 'the Raising of the Bridges' in *October*," I would gladly have agreed with him — while insisting, at the same time, on the critical necessity of comparing these scenes with, say, Hitchcock's long-take camera-movements in *Under Capricorn* and Marnie's riding accident in order to establish why, and to what extent, this is so. The problem with such an exercise, from Mr. Bordwell's standpoint, is that the shot from *Le Plaisir* is objectionable on the second of the grounds that he cites above, and it is the unfortunate fact that any element of any film is objectionable on exactly the same ground which disqualifies Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues as reliable guides to the boundaries of the Hollywood style. The "classical constraints" are not *classical* constraints. They are the constraints (or conditions) of cultural production in general, which is always mediated by conventions and which, in the case of narrative, always involves the construction of a causal sequence centred on the actions of persons (whether or not the persons are "individuals" like — to cover the ample range — Achilles or David Copperfield or Norman Bates). If *Sh! The Octopus* has to go, then so does *The Man with a Movie Camera*, and while the authors of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* may well wish to equivocate on this matter, it remains the case that the principle effect of their hatchet-job on Hollywood movies is to hoist them on their own petard.

There could be no more salutary warning than this of the extreme dangers which attend the use of the concept of "Hollywood classicism": I have come to feel, indeed, that the concept may well be more trouble than it's worth. Noting that "it was probably André Bazin who gave the adjective ('classical') the most currency," Mr. Bordwell argues that "it seems proper to retain (it) in English" in that

"the principles which Hollywood claims as its own rely on notions of decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver's response — canons which critics in any medium usually call 'classical'." (pp. 3-4)

The presence in this list of the word "mimesis" forbodes the elephantiasis to which, in the hands of the authors of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, "classicism" will rapidly succumb, but even if "mimesis" were excised, the sentence would remain ominous. Mr. Bordwell assumes that classicism is a thing with a number of stable, clearly defined and unambiguous characteristics which manifest themselves in

statistically verifiable ways and whose meaning is completely self-evident, and the method of himself and his collaborators virtually consists of identifying the imputed features of "the Hollywood style" which correspond to the imputed model of classicism. Our authors know what classicism is — "elegance, unity, rule-governed craftsmanship" (p. 4) — and they proceed to demonstrate the existence of these qualities in the hapless specimens on their operating table. This is building on sand with a vengeance; and while it never occurs to Mr. Bordwell to question the adequacy of his notion of "the classical" he *does* acknowledge, fleetingly, that some of the specimens (which are at this point still alive) are behaving rather oddly:

"All of which is not to say that Hollywood's classicism does not have disparate, even 'non-classical', sources. Certainly the Hollywood style seeks effects that owe a good deal to, say, romantic music or nineteenth century melodrama." (p. 4)

The terms in which the doubt is expressed (Hollywood's classicism has non-classical sources) are themselves a way of overcoming it, but it is as plain to Mr. Bordwell as it is to me that no less self-effacing and decorous genre could be imagined than the American melodrama, and that if we wish to offer quintessential examples of "propriety" and "cool control of the perceiver's response," *Broken Blossoms*, *The Wind*, *Duel in the Sun*, *Imitation of Life* and Minnelli's *Madame Bovary* are not the first works of art that spring to mind. Mr. Bordwell can do nothing with this inconvenient fact except repress it, and having gestured towards the melodrama he goes on at once to add, with mind-blowing insouciance:

"The point is simply that Hollywood films constitute a fairly coherent aesthetic tradition which sustains individual creation." (ibid)

If *this* is what "classicism" boils down to, it is hardly surprising that all narratives turn out to be classical — except those which are granted a Declaration of Indulgence (as opposed to Oblivion) by Mr. Bordwell.

One is tempted to say simply that the book has made the concept of "classical Hollywood" unusable and throw it cheerfully in the wastepaper-basket, but before one does so one should consider a set of possibilities which lie beyond the authors' ken.

A nymph of quality admires our knight;  
He marries, bows at court, and grows polite;  
Leaves the dull cits, and joins (to please the fair)  
The well-bred cuckolds in St. James's air;  
First, for his son a gay commission buys,  
Who drinks, whores, fights and in a duel dies:  
His daughter flaunts a viscount's tawdry wife;  
She bears a coronet and pox for life.

This — it comes from one of the most astonishing passages in Pope, the story of Sir Balaam which concludes the moral essay *On the Use of Riches* — is pre-eminently "classical": the effect depends on the elegance, precision and propriety embodied in the convention of the heroic couplet, and on the regularity and predictability with which the formal pattern of the verse repeats itself. At the same time, however, the poetry is clearly highly *improper* — it borders, indeed, like so much of Pope's verse, on the obscene — and as we read it, we observe that there would be little point in trying to disentangle "propriety," from "impropriety" or fix the place where one ends and the other begins. When, in the last line, the stress falls, with perfect "propriety," as convention dictates,

on "pox," the effect is not only elegant and decorous but also jarring and startling — and, of course, witty. Pope's "classical" wit, in all its varieties, is invariably bound up with the creation of "shocks" of this kind: the wit *is* the shock, which is generated by the collision between the high decorum of Pope's conventions and a use of language which is both immaculately refined and, it might have been thought, incompatible with decorum of any kind. This tension in the verse, while it is certainly focussed in words such as "pox," "cuckolds" and "whores," is not confined to them. It is a pervasive presence, and it generates an answering tension in the reader, who is held in a state of continual alert attention to the tone and significance of a speaking voice which is very far from being "self-effacing." The conventions of classical 18th century English verse, as Pope employs them, exist in the form of this speaking voice, which is present as a voice to the reader who knows the conventions. In the context provided by the formalism of Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues, it is "proper" to add that Pope's verse is not, for himself or his readership, a sophisticated game involving "the application of devices" or the conventionalized deviation from formal norms which then reassert themselves. The narrative of Sir Balaam is a devastating critical analysis of a representative 18th century bourgeois life.

Or consider this: Pope again — this time the passage from the second of the *Moral Essays*, "Of the Character of Women," in which he represents the old age to which his culture condemns its fashionable society ladies:

At last, to follies youth could scarce defend,  
It grows their age's prudence to pretend;  
Ashamed to own they gave delight before,  
Reduced to feign it, when they give no more:  
As hags holds sabbaths less for joy than spite,  
So these their merry, miserable night:  
Still round and round the ghosts of beauty glide  
And haunt the places where their honour died.

The first three couplets imply a critical distance from the women's "folly," and a fastidious revulsion from the grotesque indignities of their fate, which, by the time we get to "hags" and "spite," have begun to look like misogynistic animus: the women, apparently, have now been firmly placed as "other" by the knowing, superior male narrator. Then, suddenly, the tone changes — with a force the more impressive for the rapidity and completeness of the change. The exquisite cadence of

Still round and round the ghosts of beauty glide

involves the reader in the movement of characters who, only a second before, had been brutally objectified as cackling, raddled haridans, and the effect is completed by the remarkable use of enjambement: both the emphatic end-stopping of the line and the confident, regular pattern of stresses characteristic of Enlightenment prosody are, in this final couplet, completely subdued. The reader (and this is the point) is caught off guard. A distinct imaginative effort is involved in getting from the lurid *walpurgnacht* of the penultimate couplet to the quite different, and incompatible, supernatural world of the "ghosts of beauty," who may well be Wilis but who are certainly *not* witches, and this effort is continuous with a radical change in our attitude to the women — a change of which Pope encourages us to become conscious by making it impossible to anticipate the shift of tone. The dance of the ghosts is a *danse macabre*, but unlike the witches' sabbath it is neither grotesque nor "other." It has the eerie, elegiac grace of the couplet which describes it, and the

verse's movement, as we follow and respond to it, makes us participants in the dance. The key to this astonishing transition is "delight" in the third line — a word which, given the context, we have probably under-valued but the significance of which now strikes us retrospectively. "Delight" evokes a positive concept of pleasure, spontaneity and vitality which is debased and trivialised in the *beau monde* where the women move, but which is now recalled, as something tragically lost, by the magical ballet of their ghosts. It is this sense of loss and waste — so poignantly realised, and so vividly communicated to the reader, through the couplet's movement, as a process in which s/he is involved — that allows Pope to invest the conventional and (one might think) impossibly bombastic trope of "the death of Honour" with that immense solemnity and power. The "honour" that died here is suggestive of very much more than the term usually connotes, and "died," when it comes, carries its full weight of meaning. Pope has now prepared us for what follows, in which the profound sympathetic involvement with the women created by the final couplet and the savage critical irony of the lines which precede it are, with almost incredible perfection, combined.

See how the world its veterans rewards!  
A youth of frolics, an old age of cards;  
Fair to no purpose, artful to no end,  
Young without lovers, old without a friend;  
A fop their passion, but their prize a sot,  
Alive, ridiculous; and dead, forgot!

Pope's anger and intensity, at once contained and enabled by the extreme rigours of the decorum, have now become a protest on the women's behalf.

The point in invoking Pope here (whose classicism no one will dispute) is, firstly, to suggest that "decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, cool control of the perceiver's response and rule-governed craftsmanship" are tricky concepts, and that Mr. Bordwell and his colleagues do not know what they mean. They do not, in fact, mean any one thing, and they are perfectly consonant (as I have tried to show) with the creation of dramatic/poetic effects whose tone and character is very far removed from anything that the word "decorum" ordinarily signifies in conventional usage. We do not know what "classical decorum" means until we have analysed its use in a given context, and this context is not "purely" formal but dramatic: it is a context of *realized meaning*. The proprieties of English Enlightenment verse can be listed in the form of a set of rules, but these rules meant very different things to Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Cowper and Crabbe. The verse of these writers is governed by a common decorum, but it would be impossible to extract from their poetry a unitary definition or understanding of the rules to which they all adhered, and it would be exceedingly foolish to try.

Pope allows me, secondly, to address myself to Mr. Bordwell's claim that

"our account of (the classical) paradigm must also recognize how redundant it is. Not only are individual devices equivalent, but they often appear together. For instance, there are several cues for a flashback in a classical Hollywood film: pensive character attitude, close-up of face, slow dissolve, voice-over narration, sonic 'flashback', music. In any given case, several of these will be used together." (p. 5)

This is about as intelligent as claiming that Pope's paradigm is redundant because the basic metrical unit is signified by five feet *and* ten syllables *and* rhyme *and* end-stopping. These

“devices” are, in a sense, “equivalent,” and they invariably occur together (enjambement and the occasional alexandrine are the only possible deviations) but the presence of “redundancy,” like the significance of decorum, can only be decided, as Mr. Bordwell lamely adds, on the evidence of a “given case.” His catalogue of “cues for a flashback” is perfectly accurate, but in the “given case” a specific selection will be made from among the cues, we will dissolve *from* something particular *to* something particular, the voice-over will be speaking *words* which relate to the images in particular ways, and the “pensive character attitude” will convey a particular set of feelings. It is the given case that matters, and great classical art is remarkable, not for its redundancy, but for the complete absence of it. Every word in the passages of Pope which I have quoted (and they are fully representative of his mature practice) is intensely significant, and classical conventions, in the hands of a great artist, actively conduce to this kind of density and complexity of realisation. The conventions are only redundant to the eye of the formalist.

The comparison between “classical” English verse and “classical” Hollywood has, however, another — rather different — point. Pope’s conventions were so much *more* constricting than Hitchcock’s that they were only able to produce one Pope; and when we examine the two traditions we are immediately struck by the infinitely greater range of the formal possibilities available to the classical film-maker, and the infinitely greater number both of distinct styles and of distinguished single works which the Hollywood tradition produced. In searching for an explanation of this fact, we could do worse than to glance back at Mr. Bordwell’s off-handed (and soon-forgotten) admission that Hollywood’s “classicism” had sources which were “even” not classical — which were, in fact, vulgar in precisely the kind of way which alarmed the 18th century. Pope, too, had his “non-classical” sources — most crucially, Donne, who was, by Enlightenment standards, thoroughly “improper”; and it is important to note, for the present purpose, that the only English poet *after* Pope who was able to produce consistently distinguished verse in heroic couplets, George Crabbe, is also remarkable for the strength of his connections with artistic forms external to the dominant poetic convention of his time (Chaucer on the one hand, and the newly-emerging, non-“polite” novel on the other). The conditions in which the classical English poet worked made it extraordinarily difficult to establish connections of this sort, for the reason that the “rules” of Enlightenment poetic decorum are so emphatically and self-consciously the rules of a social class which imagines itself to be creating the first true post-classical civilisation. Cultural propriety, for the Enlightenment, is and is felt to be continuous with the bourgeois social project as a whole, and the proprieties are therefore enforced, as Leavis has pointed out,<sup>8</sup> with what seems in retrospect to have been an impoverishing rigidity. In order to write good classical verse, Pope and Crabbe had to find a means of being impolite with propriety, and their poetry stands out by virtue of the uniqueness of their success. When we again find major poetry which is rooted in classical forms, as we do in Wordsworth and Byron, its authors are Romantics who have reinvented the forms and explicitly repudiated Enlightenment propriety.

Classical Hollywood, by contrast, made being impolite with propriety remarkably easy for those who were so disposed; and I do not think that the advantages which Hollywood enjoyed as a result of being considered beneath the contempt of cultivated bourgeois taste — and thus not answerable to its canons — have ever been sufficiently

stressed. It has its decorum, but it is the decorum of an art form which was, and was felt to be, intrinsically indecorous, and which was therefore in a position to grab any set of traditions or conventions that came along. While he insists so much on the “decorum” and “elegance” and the “rule-governed craftsmanship,” Mr. Bordwell is also offended by these magpie proclivities: the early pickings were, as he virtually says, “low,” and when Hollywood moved on to higher things like Expressionism and montage it was only to debase and recuperate them (pp. 72-4). I have to say that this sounds to me like bourgeois snobbery rationalising itself, and I have my suspicions of an account of Hollywood’s appropriation of montage which has a great deal to say about Slavko Vorkapich and goes on to mention *The Taking of Pelham 123*, but which shows no consciousness of the existence of, say, the final scene of *Notorious* or the death of Mr. Hadley in *Written on the Wind* or the exposition of *Clash by Night*. However, it is certainly true, as Mr. Bordwell fears, that most of the traditions grabbed — the assorted romanticisms and modernisms, psychoanalysis, melodrama, variety and vaudeville, that mongrel form “the bourgeois novel” itself — are not in any significant sense of the word “classical.” On the contrary, they are all, in their different ways, products of that complex cultural process initiated by the Romantic movement in the course of which the notion of cultural decorum established, and so rigorously enforced, by the Enlightenment was progressively undermined,<sup>9</sup> either by conscious programme or by the inexorable expansion of the market for cultural products. The decorum of “classical” Hollywood is a decorum, but it also represents the most extreme form of the repudiation of decorum in the Enlightenment’s sense which bourgeois culture has produced (and which “postmodern art” is now struggling to re-invent<sup>10</sup>). This is why Hollywood was scandalous to a Grierson and to an Adorno alike, and why it remains so immensely important: the studio system marks the last point at which it was historically possible for a bourgeois art form to be rigorously and systematically conventional while at the same time subverting, and throwing into confusion, all existing cultural boundaries and proprieties and the ideologies of culture guaranteed by them.

It follows, therefore, that if we are to retain a concept of Hollywood “classicism” — as I suppose we must — we have to define and use it very carefully. The classical Hollywood conventions have been arrived at through the yoking by violence together of the most contradictory and heterogeneous formal and ideological materials, and the resulting admixture is both exceptionally elegant and coherent *and* potentially explosive. We cannot pretend, of course, that the cultural riches at Hollywood’s disposal (like those at the disposal of the English Renaissance theatre) were not regularly squandered. *Sh! The Octopus* and *The Speed Spook* exist, though I have no intention of talking about them, and they have no more interest for the film critic than the student of opera would discover in the procession of *Dafnes* and *Orfeos* who dragged their weary limbs across the stage in the late 18th century. The great and the interesting Hollywood films, however, *explore their conventions*, and their classicism is that of works committed to various kinds of excess and cultural critique under social conditions which include the successive Production Codes. It is rather like holding a fireworks display in a gunpowder plant: the enterprise is both dangerous in itself and subject to severe penalties. Some works blunder heedlessly into peril, and having become aware of the fact struggle frantically to extricate themselves without being caught. Others again proceed with sufficient caution to get away with it, but pay a price in the more or less diminished

glory and audacity of the display. A third group of works, however, sets out to raise the roof while also escaping detection, and they are able to do so because Hollywood's "classical" decorum permits the dramatic realisation of the compressed, combustible cultural materials which, at the same time, it actively contains. These works can be both "proper" (if not polite) and outrageous: they can be "just-a-melodrama" and Epic Theatre, "just-a-western" and a critique of American imperialism, "just-a-screwball-comedy" and a celebration of the abolition of bourgeois gender roles, "just-swatches-of-classical-style" and exemplary forms of high modernism. The 18th century has its own examples of such perverse objects. Pope played both ends against the middle with dazzling expertise, and with the most profound seriousness; and as we listen to the symphonies of Haydn's "sturm-und-drang" period or read *Mansfield Park*, we come to realise that it is perfectly possible — where the spirit is willing — to reconcile the requirements of a decorum very much more stringent than that which weighed on Lang and Hitchcock with a critical, exploratory artistic project. How does one narrate class conflict and the oppression of women to a polite bourgeois audience? "You don't know?" replies Jane Austen, "you think it can't be done? Watch!"

This is the spirit in which the great classical movies operate. □

## FOOTNOTES

1. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*: David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson (Routledge,

London 1988). Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent page references are to this work.

2. *Katharine Hepburn: the Thirties and After*: Andrew Britton (Tyneside Cinema Publications/British Film Institute 1984, p. 102).
3. "The Ideology of Screen": Andrew Britton (*Movie 26*, Winter 1978/79, p. 21).
4. *Narration in the Fiction Film*: David Bordwell (University of Wisconsin Press, US 1985, p. 48).
5. *Romanticism and Realism: the Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art*: Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner (W.W. Norton & Company, US 1984).
6. *Narration in the Fiction Film* (op. cit.)
7. *ibid.* pp. 46-7.
8. See the analysis of "the Augustan tradition" in *Revaluation*: F.R. Leavis (Penguin, GB 1980).
9. "Perhaps an even better definition of Romanticism than the progressive destruction of centrality would be a progressive destruction of decorum — not, we must emphasise, the absence of decorum but the *process* of its destruction" (Rosen and Zerner, op. cit. p. 38).
10. "Postmodern classicism" is no doubt the most gross example. Commenting on the Venturi design for the new Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in London, Hugh Honour remarks that the projected building "defers to its setting in a city where past versions of classicism are prevalent," and adds, charmingly, that the design "is, above all, an example of architectural tact" ("The Battle over Post-Modern Buildings," *New York Review of Books* for September 29, 1988, pp. 27-33). The decorum of "postmodern" art is always "tactful" in this sense, though the setting deferred to is not primarily geographical.



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